



**Science Fiction Society at Penn State (PSI-FI)
Presents . . .**

The Jump Point, A Speculative Fiction Magazine

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EDITORIAL

The Jump Point Speculative Fiction Magazine serves as a gateway to other worlds that are both familiar and alien to us (all puns intended). For some, the Jump Point offers an escape; it is an instrument used to explore uncharted territories distant from our reality. In this sense, the Jump Point can evoke a sense of wonder, and perhaps, humility. Travelers can visit the depths of our universe, and roam foreign galaxies that contain eccentric star systems inhabited by the most peculiar beings. Such voyagers can also immerse themselves in timelines not quite like our own, and embark on quests set in fantastical realms not governed by the laws of our reality.

For other passengers, entering the Jump Point can have the opposite effect. For them, the journey may be inwards and the destination the passenger's self. These individuals may enter a new state of mind to search within themselves; they might contemplate the idea of the self, and discover new meanings.

Sometimes, passengers of the Jump Point may find that the gateway leads to both the distant *and* the near. Even in the farthest reaches of space, time, and/or realities, they might find truths about themselves where they least expected.

For readers who are unfamiliar with us, this is the first print issue of the Jump Point, and it is a product of astronomical effort generated by our staff, board of directors, and of course, the authors. The stories, pieces, and designs entailed in this issue have experienced countless revisions, with an aim for a professional product.

With that being said, I hope the following stories and pieces will evoke the same feelings of wonder in you as they have in us. So please, flip the page and take your first step into the Jump Point.

Sincerely,

Anil Erol
Editor-in-Chief, The Jump Point



Murmurations of the End

Alex Headley

I walk through the park waving my mobility cane, which strikes the leg of the bench with a dull metallic ring at the exact moment I expect it to. I carry the white cane more to signal my blindness to the sighted than to guide my way. I often find those who see to be less aware of their surroundings than myself. I sit down on the bench to relax my aching joints and bask in the sun's now seasonable warmth on this January day. For decades, I came to this place to eat my lunch and feed the birds. For years, I have been unable to eat outside due to the filtration system I must wear to make the air safe to breathe. For months, I have not encountered a single bird. Yet I continue to come here every day, weather permitting.

Some birds still live. I know because I sense their presences—as I always have—though they are few and far between. Similar to how I imagine the stars shine in the night sky, birds are now mere points inside my mind, though great flocks once danced and swirled there. As a child, I asked my parents about these mesmerizing murmurations. Could they sense them too? Or was it due to my blindness? Worried and confused, they took me to my pediatrician, who suspected schizophrenia and recommended I see a specialist. The psychiatrist said people with congenital cortical blindness cannot develop schizophrenia. Instead, he diagnosed me with ADD and an overactive imagination. I learned to live with my flapping distractions and stopped speaking about them. My parents thought I grew out of it—whatever “it” was. Words cannot explain my ability anyway, just as it's impossible for someone to convey the color of the sky to me. Birds navigate by perceiving the Earth's magnetic field. Perhaps my sense mirrors theirs. I do not know.

In spite of my mask, I still smell the sprawling city's faint scent of burnt plastic and sewage. Unlike the cities of my youth, I hear little more than an oppressive silence. Few people even step outside these days. No honking horns or rumbling engines since the vehicles that do get use are all self-driving and electric. But widespread attempts at sustainability came too late to save the Earth. Our past has cost us our future.

I sit in meditation for more than an hour, the silence only broken by my occasional wracking coughs. Dinosaurs didn't completely go extinct when the meteor hit 65 million years ago; the survivors evolved into birds. Humans will manage to do what

the meteor couldn't. I mourn for the birds and the Earth and the children who will never be born. But we humans brought this fate upon ourselves and the Earth will heal itself in time. I grieve for all the innocent life lost, but I *feel* the loss of the birds, so I mourn them most.

I contemplate wandering around the city, following my senses in search of a bird. But I am too old and blind and fearful of the unfamiliar. I prepare to stand up and walk back to my apartment, but then I am struck by the unmistakable sensation of a bird—flying in my direction. A minute passes in increasing anticipation until I can tell the bird is almost upon me. With a trembling hand, I reach into my pocket and scoop out a small handful of birdseed, which I throw out in front of me. The seeds fall upon the ground with a soft static hiss. Moments later, I hear the rustle of feathers and a warbling coo as a pigeon lands. I grab some more birdseed and hold it in my outstretched hand. I wait for the pigeon to eat the seeds I threw then sprinkle a few more by my feet. People used to call pigeons 'rats with wings,' but to me there is no difference between a pigeon and a dove. The pigeon hops up onto my wrist and starts pecking at the seeds in my hand. I sense he is old and sick, but still alive. I wonder which one of us will die first. Either way, I somehow know this will be my final encounter with a bird. I smile as the pigeon coos, the sensation reminiscent of the purring of a cat. Then, having eaten its fill, the pigeon spreads its wings and flies away.

"Goodbye," I whisper as tears fall from my eyes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Headley is a senior graduating in Spring 2018 with a major in English. He thinks it's strange to write about himself in the third person (but is doing so anyway). Alex hopes to be a successful author of speculative fiction someday, but writing for "The Jump Point" is currently the pinnacle of his career. His favorite book is Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, though he read Dan Simmons' *Hyperion Cantos* a few months ago and won't shut up about it. He also wonders how spacewhales communicate in a vacuum. Probably with lasersongs.



The Hym

Ray Beer

I pooped the bed again last night. Sometimes I pee the sheets during the night, but my dreams this past week have been so scary that they squeezed *everything* out of me. This bad dream was the second from Hym. He didn't talk to me like the last one, but I knew it was Hym. I had bad dreams in the past where zombies with rotting flesh and missing limbs chased me through the grass fields next to our house, or where a pack of wolves cornered me against a chain-link fence until the alpha finally bit me awake, but Momma said these were just nightmares. She told me that I had night terrors when I was a baby. I thrashed and howled in my sleep until eventually snapping awake. Momma couldn't wake me up until it had passed, so she cradled me in her arms and sang Hush Little Baby hoping that I wouldn't wake Clara, Jim, or especially Daddy—Daddy didn't like to be woken up by anyone except his alarm clock. In Hym's nightmares, I know I'm dreaming but can't wake up, so I guess they're night terrors too.

Like last time, I picked a quarter from the secret stash underneath my mattress to give to Hym. I had three dollars and fifty-six cents left, including a gold dollar coin with Sacajawea on the face. First, because my room now smelled like the port-o-potty outside of school, I picked up the number two with a tissue from my nightstand and shot it into the basketball hoop waste basket by the door.

Luckily, I made the shot, missing my favorite Toy Story poster—Woody and Buzz blasting off above the other toys—plastered nearby. It stood separated from the Dinosaur posters that dominated the walls: an armored stegosaurus fending off an angry T. Rex, a squadron of pteranodons swooping into the sea for pre-historic fish as a liopleurodon watched hungrily from below the surface, and a huge brontosaurus running from a meteor that had exploded in the jungle behind her. Intertwined between the posters were my glow-in-the-dark space stickers; Saturns, Jupiters, moons, space men, and stars from small to large all branched across the walls and ceiling to form a network that lit up the room during the night like fireflies. I turned to see my SpongeBob bedsheets—now dirtied—and the feathered dreamcatcher floating above. The hamburger alarm clock on the nightstand read 7:30 a.m.

Rain patted against the window while outside's cloudy weather darkened the room. On rainy days, I always liked to play

with my toys, but first I needed to pay Hym. Uncomfortable because of my soiled dinosaur-print footie pajamas, I shuffled towards the large, wooden toy chest in between the door and dresser. The toy chest was plain; a dark-brown wood and musty smell defined its character. Still, the size—big enough to fit both Jim and me as we hid from Clara during hide-and-seek—fit all my favorite toys, who had plenty of character to make up for the boring container passed down from Grandpa. My dinosaur toys—Rex the T. Rex, Terry the Pterodactyl, and Horny the Triceratops—roamed the left-side of the box, while the plastic, green army men platoon stood in battle-ready formation close by. I also had some Lego people I stole from Clara, a rubber king cobra, some Nerf guns, and my fluffy beagle, Henry. He sat in the middle of the chest with his tongue panting outwards. I knew Henry was a baby toy, but he had been my first stuffed animal, so he was like family. Daddy said to always stick by family, even though it was tough. Maybe Daddy got mad all the time to make us tough? Then, I reached for Woody; this limp, cloth-bodied, plastic-headed cowboy was my favorite—or, at least he had been my favorite—since Momma bought him as a birthday present years ago. I pulled his string. “Someone’s poisoned the waterhole!” he said.

I put Woody down and looked at the right-side of the toy chest, where Hym always lay alone. The other toys and Hym didn’t seem to get along. Whenever I opened the chest, the others were jumbled on top of each other in a messy heap, but Hym always sat neatly on the right-side with a space of separation between him and the others. Now, Hym wasn’t there.

I thought Daddy would surely holler at me during breakfast this morning. Whenever I peed the bed, he became cross and gave me a spanking. He always said, “How are we supposed to look like a respectable family if the neighbors hear you keep pissing yourself?”

But, this time, Daddy didn’t. Instead, because Jim laughed so hard that bits of omelet shot out of his mouth while milk poured down his nose, Daddy cuffed him on the shoulder and barked at him to shut up. Daddy looked shaky at the breakfast table: he kept fidgeting his collar, tapping his fingers, and glancing back at me.

“Everything alright, Adam? You need anything, son?” he asked. Daddy *never* asked me those questions. In the past week, he asked them a lot.

I politely said no, thinking this might be a trick like when he asked if I wanted a cigarette. I got a rough whooping that day, and Daddy made me wear a sweater to school although it was August.

After breakfast, I wanted to find Hym but Momma caught me

by the arm before I ran upstairs. Her face scrunched as she cupped my face with one hand. She said, “Adam, make sure to stay out of your Daddy’s office. You know he doesn’t like anyone fiddling around in there.”

“I didn’t, Momma. I swear.” I knew not to step foot in Daddy’s office ever since Christmas with Uncle Hank two years ago. I happened upon the room—usually locked, but then ajar—because I wanted to find a good book for Uncle Hank. He told stories in a slow, boring voice like Eeyore that always made me laugh. In the office, I found a black moleskin book sitting on Daddy’s desk, so I brought it down and sat on Uncle Hank’s lap. He opened the book and got a baffled look on his face. He started mumbling about Daddy, our neighbor Ms. Lynn, and her pussy. I never knew that Ms. Lynn owned a cat, or that Daddy wanted a cat, but the story—using a lot of bad words—talked mainly about those topics. I didn’t find that story too interesting. Next, Daddy walked into the room and saw Uncle Hank reading from the black moleskin book. His face turned as red as the crabs we caught last summer down by the bay, then he snatched the book, ran it back upstairs, and never talked about it again. After Uncle Hank left, I got beatings for nearly two weeks.

“Don’t lie to me,” she said, putting her hands on her hips. “I found your new toy in there—the clown one. What’s his name?”

“Oh, Hym. Sorry, Momma, I guess I forgot.” I knew Hym moved about on his own. I couldn’t control him, or else maybe he’d give me more bad dreams.

“Well, please don’t do it again. Here,” she said, handing Hym to me.

Hym was a cast iron piggy bank shaped like a clown with chipped red, white and yellow paint. He looked ancient, like a toy that one of those Amish kids played with. He had a cone-shaped, floppy hat, squinty eyes and a smirky smile with a slot in the middle to eat coins. His arm extended to an open palm asking sneeringly for tributes, while a lever on his back moved the arm up and down. I called him Hym because that was the name written in curvy, thin letters on his bottom.

I carried Hym upstairs to my room and set him down in his special spot within the toy chest. I placed the quarter in his hand, pulled the lever, and watched the quarter disappear as Hym, smiling all the while, swallowed it up. Like last time, I didn’t hear the quarter clink inside Hym. I knew that quarter was gone forever.

The first night terror happened after Momma brought Hym home last Tuesday. She came back from some old folks’ garage

sale down on Marcato Street. She still had a plum-sized bruise around her right eye that shared the fruit's same purplish hue. Momma often had bruises like a boxer. But, she was not a boxer. She was just Momma.

"You know, it's a tough job, being your Momma," she said—like she always said—when I asked about her bruises. "I've got to fight off all the bad guys who try to hurt my little boy. But, it's worth the hard work." She winked and smiled. Then, she handed Hym to me.

"The Castevets told me this is a special toy, so I bought it just for you," she said. "Each time you put a coin in him, make a wish."

I didn't believe Momma because I was a big kid who knew that magic wishes only happened in books and movies. So, I threw Hym in the toy chest and went back to playing cowboys-and-Indians with Woody. Later, after I went to sleep, it happened.

I started off lying in bed. Then, as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I peeked around. Everything looked normal enough, so I thought that I must be awake. My hamburger alarm clock read 3:00 a.m. The numbers blinked faintly red, adding to the space stickers' slime-green glow. But, there was another light coming inside the room from the door's crack.

Slipping out from Buzz Lightyear covers, I crept over to my toy chest. I searched inside, panicked, sifted through the chest a second time, and panicked again. I couldn't find Woody anywhere in the chest. I needed Woody whenever I got scared.

Suddenly, the light flickered and I heard a thud in the hallway outside. Through the crack in the door, I saw Woody sitting in the middle of the hall. His cloth body somehow sat upright. The eyes on his plastic head stared in my direction. The string on his back—already pulled—slowly retracted. "This town ain't big enough for the two of us," he said.

I rushed into the hallway, grabbed Woody, and hugged his limp, cloth body close to mine. The hallway around me looked ordinary. Brass-rimmed picture frames of the family—Clara, Jim and me in our school uniforms, Momma and Daddy's wedding photos, portraits of Grandma and Grandpa—hung across the walls. An end-table with a vase of orange lilies and a picture of Daddy in his army uniform stood at the end of the hall next to a door. I walked towards it.

"Why didn't you want to make a wish, Adam?" a voice, deep and snarling like one of the monsters from Jim's video games, echoed throughout the hallway. I couldn't tell from which direction the dark voice came. I raced towards the door at the end of the hall.

All of a sudden, I was lying in bed again. Standing up felt

harder this time, as if my body was fighting against a strong wind. I went out into the hallway and noticed a difference in the house around me. The hall, surrounded by a purplish-black void, melted slowly like ice cream running down the cone. The voice whispered dark things to me, but I don't remember much except his lunatic laugh. I rushed down the hall. The laugh rang out everywhere.

Each time I reached the door, I repeated the loop back to my bed. The force working against my body became stronger as the hallway became cloudier and the laughter became sharper. I started to panic; I thought that I might be stuck in that twisted loop forever.

At one point, I trudged from my bed to finally reach the room at the end of the hall. It took all my energy to move. I reached the door and went inside the room, where Momma lay asleep in her bed. Her makeup ran down her face as if she'd been crying.

"Don't you want to help Momma, Adam?" the dark voice said.

I pulled on her arms, trying to wake her up, but she stayed asleep. I started screaming, shaking Momma, and the dark voice laughed more intensely. After my screaming and the laughter reached such a climax that I felt close to crazy, I woke up panting, covered in sweat.

I knew who the dark voice belonged to.

The first thing I did—even before cleaning up my accident—was get a dime from my secret stash. I made a wish to protect Momma and me from all the bad guys, then fed Hym the dime.

I was playing dino rampage—Rex, Terry, and Horny attacked a Lego city of civilians as the army platoon came to the rescue—when Daddy burst into my room. Scared I woke him up from his nap because of the noisy dinos, I prepared myself for a spanking.

But, Daddy seemed strange. He looked older, almost as old as Grandpa. His hair—normally a chestnut brown slicked back with pomade—stuck out in disheveled, graying tufts. Dark bags sagged underneath his eyes, which were bloodshot. His skin was paler than usual. What happened to Daddy since breakfast?

"You love your Daddy, don't you, Adam?" Daddy asked. His right eye twitched and fingers squirmed around as he tried to steady himself on my dresser.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Well, Adam, I did something bad last night," he said. "Daddy went over Ms. Lynn's house. I don't know how you found out, but he told me you—well, I promise I'll never go over there again, okay? I promise I'll never meet with her again. Please, Adam, please understand." Daddy fell to his knees and grabbed my hand. He started to cry. "Do you love me, Adam? Tell me you love me."

“I love you, Daddy.” In my night terror last night, I saw Daddy and Ms. Lynn wrestling naked together. They kept kissing, too, which didn’t fit right with me. Daddy should only kiss Momma. Every time I tried to run away, I looped back to Daddy and Ms. Lynn wrestling until I eventually woke up. After Momma found Hym, I made a wish to punish Daddy if he ever kissed someone other than Momma.

“Please understand me, son,” Daddy sobbed. “Daddy makes mistakes, but he still loves you. These dreams—they’re too much for me. I can’t handle them, Adam. Please make them stop. Promise me you’ll make them stop.”

“I promise, Daddy,” I lied.

I understood. As soon as Daddy left, I took Hym out from his special spot in the toy chest. I placed my gold dollar in his hand, pulled the lever, and made a wish.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ray Beer is a senior undergraduate student at Penn State University Park majoring in Information Sciences and Technology. He plans on graduating May 2018 and to work on a technology consulting position in Arlington, Virginia. On the side, he enjoys writing/reading fiction, photography, film and travelling the world (favorite place so far is Okinawa, Japan). He hopes to continue writing and taking pictures as he join the scary real world.

RECIPE FOR SZECHUAN SAUCE

by Rachel Lutz

1. Mince 6 cloves of Garlic and fry in skillet.
2. Add 4 tablespoons Balsamic Vinegar.
3. Add soy sauce to taste (Only Jerry uses low sodium, don’t be a Jerry).
4. Add 2 tablespoon Plum Sake.
5. Do 2 shots of Plum Sake.
6. Reduce sauce slightly.
7. Chug Plum Sake for 3 seconds.
8. Add 3 1/2 tablespoons of tasty firestorm (Siracha).
9. Add 2 tablespoon brown sugar.
10. 1 tablespoon of blood, sweat, and tears.
11. Add red pepper flakes and minced Ginger to taste.
12. Probably add salt because it makes everything taste better.
13. Consume, if any, of remaining Plum Sake.
14. Simmer and stir until arm falls off (5 minutes).
15. Dip nuggets in delicious Szechuan sauce.
16. M-m-m-m-make more! *belches*

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Michael Cawley

So far, college life had not been as much fun as Mark had hoped. He was in his second month of his freshman year at a large state university and had yet to attend a single party, but he looked forward to this changing tonight. Delta Kappa had just accepted Mark's roommate, Chad, into the fraternity and were throwing a party to welcome the new members. Chad was bringing Mark to the party as his guest.

"This party's gonna be awesome!" Mark said as he walked with Chad to the frat house downtown.

"Yeah! Who knows? Maybe you'll finally get laid," said Chad.

"Say that a little louder, why don't you?" grumbled Mark.

Mark and Chad arrived at the small but fancy-looking stone house with the Greek letters "Delta Kappa" over the entrance. They walked down the path to the door, and Chad rang the doorbell.

A tall, burly college-aged guy opened the door. "Sup, Chad!" he said. "Who's this?"

"Hey Tom! This is Mark, my guest," said Chad. "He's cool."

Tom rolled his eyes and grunted, then gestured for them to come in.

Mark followed Chad into the house and down a hallway that smelled of stale beer. The throbbing bass increased until they found themselves in a large, dark room full of flashing multi-colored lights. People were dancing, drinking, and making out everywhere Mark looked.

So, this was it. His first frat party.

"Man, this is sick!" said Chad. "I'm gonna go play beer pong. Wanna come?"

"Sure!" said Mark. Chad walked away and Mark began to follow him, but then he saw a girl who made him stop in his tracks. The room was full of attractive people, but she stood out from all the rest. Time seemed to slow down, much like it does in movies during situations like this. She was the most beautiful girl Mark had ever seen. Her long blond hair waved as she danced and gyrated in a little black dress that clung to her perfect figure. Mark

stood dumbfounded, wondering if he could muster up the courage to approach this girl. How could he do it? What could he say? And then—much to his astonishment—the girl walked up to *him*.

“Hey,” she said, smiling with perfect white teeth and lips accentuated with deep red lipstick. “What’s your name?”

“M-Mark... What’s yours?”

“I’m Krista,” she said, her blue eyes sparkling in the flashing lights. “Nice to meet you!”

“Nice to meet you, too,” said Mark, still in a state of shock.

“So, you wanna dance with me?”

“S-Sure!”

Krista smiled, took him by the hand, and led him the short distance to the crowded dance floor. Mark didn’t know how to dance at all, much less how to dance with a beautiful girl at a frat party. He attempted to follow Krista’s lead, moving his arms, legs, and hips to the beat of the music and feeling silly, ecstatic, and dumbstruck at the same time.

After an upbeat song or two, a slow, sappy love song started playing. Krista smiled at Mark, took his hands, and placed them on her waist. She put her own hands around his neck, and she started to sway with him.

Mark’s heart pounded in his chest. He decided to break the silence. “So, what’s your major?” he asked.

“I’m still undecided,” said Krista. “I’m a freshman.”

“Same here!” said Mark with a nervous laugh. “We have so much in common!”

Krista laughed, then stopped and stared quietly into Mark’s eyes. Then, she started to lean her face in towards Mark’s. Mark’s heart started pounding even harder and faster. Then she kissed him on the lips. The kiss started out gentle, but Krista made it more and more passionate. After God knows how long, Krista pulled away smiling. Mark was speechless.

“I’m gonna go get us some drinks. Be right back,” said Krista, and walked away.

Mark couldn’t believe it. He had kissed a girl a couple times before, but that was a long time ago, and he had never kissed a girl like *that* before. And they had only just met! Well, it was a frat party. Anything could happen.

Krista reappeared holding two red solo cups. She smiled and handed one to Mark.

“Cheers!” she said, and they both drank some sweet and undoubtedly strong alcoholic concoction. Then, they started dancing again, but this time Mark moved with more comfort and

ease. After a few minutes, Mark's vision began to blur a little. Surely, he couldn't be *that* drunk yet?

Krista's face swam before Mark's eyes and he felt himself falling. Everything went black.

Mark's head throbbed as his eyes fluttered open. His vision was still blurry but his surroundings began to come into focus. He still found himself in a dark room with flickering light, but the light wasn't colorful anymore and the music had changed from current pop hits to a sort of chanting. Mark tried to move his arms, but discovered he couldn't. He looked down and realized that he was sitting in a wooden chair with his arms tied to the back. Horrified, he looked up and saw that he was facing a bonfire surrounded by naked men dancing in a circle, flailing their arms and kicking their legs in a mad frenzy. As they danced, they chanted in a strange language:

Wiä! Wiä!

Shooka flaka shooka flaka Tog Sa'hah!

Wiä! Wiä!

Shooka flaka shooka flaka Tog Sa'hah!

Next to the fire stood a stone statue that was several feet taller than the men. It seemed vaguely humanoid in form, but was some sort of hideous monstrosity the likes of which Mark had never seen before. It had four legs and four arms, all with long sharp claws. Countless eyes covered its torso and dozens of tentacles protruded where a head should be, each one tipped with tiny fanged mouths. The statue almost seemed to move and slither in place in the dancing light of the fire.

One naked man wearing the horned goat skull on his head and holding a three-foot-long bone in his hand stepped out of the shadows across from Mark. He raised the bone into the air and shouted. The dancers stopped dancing and chanting, and they all sat down cross-legged around the fire.

Well this is just great, thought Mark. *One minute I'm at my very first frat party and the next I've been abducted by some weird cult.*

"Welcome, brothers and loyal followers of Tog Sa'hah!" shouted the man with the goat skull. "Let us recite our creed!"

The men all chanted in unison:

Wiä! Wiä!

I believe in Tog Sa'hah.

I would lay down my life for Tog Sa'hah.

*Tog Sa'hah is a Great Old One
Who ruled Earth long before man.
Tog Sa'hah and the other Great Old Ones
Have fallen into a deathlike sleep.
But one day he shall awaken,
And he shall reward those loyal to him!
He will lay waste to mankind, except for those loyal to him!
Long live the Great Old Ones! Long live Tog Sa'hah!
Wiä! Wiä!*

“Before we continue our ritual,” said the man with the skull on his head, “We must thank our brother Chad and priestess Krista.” He gestured towards the corner where Chad and Krista stood side by side, Krista wearing a white robe and Chad wearing nothing at all like the rest of the men.

Shit. I should have known she was too good to be true, and Chad's in on this shit too?

Goat skull continued speaking to his followers, “Chad and Krista have done excellent work bringing us tonight’s virgin sacrifice.”

That asshole Chad told everyone I'm a virgin? Wait—VIRGIN SACRIFICE?!?!

The crowd cheered. Mark had to think quickly. Looking around, Mark saw that he seemed to be in a basement, probably the basement of the frat house. He could see two corners of the room from where he was. Chad and Krista stood in one corner. In the other corner was a flight of stairs.

“Brothers,” said the man with the skull hat, “prepare the sacrifice!”

Two of the men walked over to Mark and picked him up in the chair. They carried him over to the fire. Mark’s heart was pounding. They tossed the chair and Mark toward the fire. Mark screamed but also kicked and jerked his body to one side. He managed to roll off the fire and land on the back of the chair with a loud crack. The chair had smashed under his weight. Mark rolled on the ground to extinguish any flames.

“Stop him!” screamed goat skull.

Two naked men tried to jump on Mark. He slipped one hand from the loose rope as one of the men punched him in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him. As he struggled for breath, he slipped his other hand from the rope and grabbed one of the sticks from the fire. Although where he gripped the stick was not on fire, it still burned his hands. But it didn’t burn as much as the other end, which he waved and thrust as his captors. They screamed in fear and pain.

Brandishing the burning stick, Mark rushed for the stairs and ran up them as fast as he could, and opened the door. He ran through the frat house, out the front door, and onto the lawn. As he ran, he kept looking back but saw no one chasing him. He kept running anyway, and he didn't stop running until he reached his residence hall, but then he realized he couldn't go back to his dorm because Chad might find him there. He kept running for several more minutes, until he collapsed to the ground. He laid there gasping for breath for a long time.

"Are you okay?" someone said.

Mark slowly sat up. A small group of students surrounded him. It was morning now. They were staring at him, sitting there on the ground wearing the singed rags that had been his clothes. Realizing the absurdity of his situation, Mark began to laugh. He thought about calling the police, but how could anyone believe such a story? What would he say? Even so, he had to do the right thing.

"Can I borrow one of your phones?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael J. Cawley IV is a senior English major minoring in Psychology at Penn State University's University Park campus. He works part-time at the Berkey Creamery, and he lives with his parents and three younger brothers. He has written many stories and poems, and while some of his poems have been published in a high school literary magazine, this is his first story to be published.

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A Gold Ball

Chet Gottfried

Ransford held a tankard of ale in one hand and gripped the counter top of the Thirsty Goblin in his other. The target distance was 20 feet. He knew he could do it. Ransford pushed off the counter, bounced off a wood pillar, collided with a table, skidded on the rushes covering the floor, twisted to avoid an oversize barbarian, kicked a spittoon into a dark corner, and collapsed onto a bench by a round table and opposite a slim youngster in his twenties, Berg from Ardsley.

Berg didn't appear impressed by the performance.

"You're drunk?"

"Huh?" Ransford waved his tankard. "I didn't lose one drop."

The ale sloshed over the sides of the tankard, and Berg frowned. "Who'd believe that an assassin from North Bolling—the largest city on the East Coast—would be a drunkard?"

Ransford concentrated and spoke coherently. "Hey, kid, I'm the only assassin in North Bolling, which isn't the largest city. It's the second largest on the East Coast. All the same, I like to think that mine is a worthwhile achievement."

"Being drunk?"

"No, you twit. I meant me being the only assassin in town."

"You're getting kind of old for the business, aren't you?"

The noise level in the Thirsty Goblin rolled over him, and Ransford waited for a quieter moment.

"Skills come with age, and the little gray in my beard means I can charge higher prices. People know and respect my experience."

"I didn't mean to sound insulting." Berg leaned forward. "Anything but! I've a lot of respect for you, which is why I want to be your apprentice. Please? Have you noticed?" He pointed to himself. "I'm dressed completely in black." Berg displayed each item in turn. "Black trousers, black shirt, and I've a black cloak over the back of my chair."

"Very impressive, but there isn't any assassin guild in North Bolling. You want to be an apprentice? You go to Burville and join the guild there. The city is ruled by the Council of Five Hundred and the councilors have a crying need for more assassins."

"I've been there." Berg spread out his hands. "The waiting list for the Burville assassin guild is this long. I wouldn't stand a chance, which is why I came to North Bolling and you. Listen, I can be your assistant. Surely you'd like the occasional day off."

"Do you have any useful abilities—aside from your taste in

fashion?”

Berg whipped out a dagger and pointed it at Ransford. “I’m fast!”

From behind Berg, a huge warrior materialized out of the darkness, grabbed the young man by the shoulders, and hoisted him into the air.

“Are you threatening our assassin?” The warrior shook Berg.

Ransford waved to the man. “It’s all right, Hatchet. We were having a bit of trade talk. You can put him down—undamaged.”

Hatchet dropped Berg onto the chair. “That’s okay then.” The warrior melted away into the crowd of other drinkers in the Thirsty Goblin.

“You want to be careful what you do here.” Ransford smiled. “The guys are very protective, which is one of the advantages of being the sole individual in a profession anywhere.”

“I’ll remember that.” Berg put his dagger on the table, and Ransford picked it up and examined the blade, which was deep and triangular, coming to a narrow point.

“It looks like one half of a sheep shears.”

Berg nodded. “That’s right. I sheared sheep in Ardsley before deciding that I had a better life ahead of me. And you better believe that’s one of the sharpest daggers. I can slit a throat before a guy could blink.”

“Can you now?” Ransford hefted his tankard and then stared straight into Berg’s brown eyes. “Maybe I can use you. Tell you what. I’ll put you to the test, to see how well you’d fit in. I don’t mind confessing that I’ve been passing up a few jobs now and again, because I don’t have as much stamina I used to. Young blood might make all the difference, especially for night jobs.” He turned to the center of the Thirsty Goblin and yelled, “Rebekka! Get your darling ass over here.”

A young woman appeared out of the gloom, but a stranger detained her by putting his hand on her shoulder. Rebekka elbowed the man in the stomach, kicked his legs out from under him, and, as soon as he was on the ground, stomped on his groin.

“Wow,” Berg said admiringly. “She’s hot.”

“She’s my daughter.”

“And as fine and as upstanding a girl as anyone could hope to have.”

“You know,” Ransford mused. “I had hoped she’d take over the business. It’s what any father would want for his child, but Rebekka can’t stand the sight of blood, which is an unfortunate liability in my line of work. She goes into a dead faint that lasts for hours.”

When Rebekka reached Ransford, she put her arm around his

shoulders, and kissed the top of his head.

“Your bald spot is becoming larger, not to mention your paunch. It wouldn’t be too bad if you were tall, but you don’t exactly scrape the sky, do you?”

“Thank you,” Ransford said.

She sat on the bench next to Ransford and helped herself to his ale. Rebekka was somewhat burly but had a fine figure and intense features. Her dark eyes reflected the fire from the Thirsty Goblin’s open hearth.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“Berg from Ardsley, ex-sheep shearer, was wondering about joining us, and so I thought to give him a try at the real thing and see what he’s made of, if he’s suitable material.”

“You won’t regret it,” Berg promised, although he had eyes only for Rebekka.

“Well, let’s see,” Rebekka said. “You’ve any number of assassinations that you’ve been delaying. To start, we have Jon from Hampshire who has offered us fifty hekkahs to do in his wife, Emily. Next, we have Emily who has offered us a hundred hekkahs to remove her husband, Jon.”

Ransford shook his head. “You know I don’t like to become involved in domestic quarrels. No matter who you kill, the other party has buyer’s remorse.”

Berg looked from Rebekka to Ransford and back to Rebekka. “You’ve memorized everything? Wouldn’t it be easier to write it down?”

“Don’t be silly, kid. The first rule of assassination is never keep anything in writing. Besides which, half our clients can’t read, so writing wouldn’t do any good. Who’s next, Rebekka?”

“One of the big ones, one you’ve been putting off for as long as I can remember: Trisha the witch. We have a dozen clients offering varying amounts, which total over four hundred hekkahs.”

Berg’s mouth fell open. “Is she that dangerous? Why does the king allow her to remain in the city?”

“The witch specializes in love potions,” Ransford said, “some of which work better than others. Of course, Trisha’s no-refund policy hasn’t endeared her to the populace. However, she has had good luck with King Gautrek, so our witch is a prosperous and respected member of the community.”

While Ransford was talking, Berg quietly took his dagger and pricked his thumb. A drop of blood appeared, and Rebekka collapsed face down on the table.

“That was a stupid thing to do.” Ransford rearranged Rebekka as best he could. “She’s going to be out for the remainder of the night, so you can bid farewell to her list. Rebekka might have

mentioned an easy one for your first job.”

“I’m sorry.” Berg hastily sheathed his dagger and sucked at the cut on his thumb. “I don’t believe it. When you told me she fainted at the sight of blood, I thought it was one of those things people said and not the whole truth. You have to admit, fainting is a severe reaction to a little blood.”

“It’s so unfortunate. At first I thought Rebekka would carry on in my name by specializing in lines for which blood wasn’t a factor. You should have seen her garroting people.” Ransford kissed his fingers. “She was superb . . . until the time came when the wire cut her target’s skin, she saw blood, and that was that. I had to finish the job for her, and she refused to garrote anyone ever again.” He sighed. “I can’t begin to describe the disappointment when your own child can’t carry on in your name. Well, no crying over sleeping beauties. According to Rebekka’s truncated list, you have to eliminate the sorcerer if you want to be my assistant.”

“Wait a moment. Didn’t you first say that Trisha is a witch?”

“Yeah.”

“Now you’re calling her a sorcerer?”

“So what?”

Berg put both hands on the table. “There’s a big difference between witches and sorcerers, because sorcerers can shoot spells at you.”

“The art of being an assassin is in finishing the job before she has a chance to toss a potion or a spell. Trust me, magic isn’t the main hassle in offing Trisha. She keeps a large, poisonous snake on the premises. That’s enough to discourage most folks from complaining to her, which is why they come to me.”

Berg shivered. “Snakes give me the creeps.”

“Don’t worry about the snakes. You take out the witch, and I’ll handle her pets.”

“Did you just say ‘snakes’? How many are there?”

“Not too many, but she has only one poisonous serpent if that’s what’s bothering you. Anyway, I’ll deal with the snakes. Kill Trisha, and you’ll become my assistant.”

“You’re not slurring your words anymore. Were you playing at being drunk?”

Ransford stood up. “I’m sober while working. The job doesn’t allow me to leave much to chance. Come on, let’s visit Trisha. I’d like to finish her before dinner.”

Berg followed him.

“Aren’t you bringing any weapons along?”

“Why? You’re doing the killing. I’m only watching.”

“The snakes?”

“Oh yeah, I promised that.” Ransford waved to a tall warrior.

“Hey, Jon, can I borrow your dagger?”

A man having a scar down the left side of his face came over and offered Ransford a two-foot-long dagger, along with scabbard and belt.

“Sure you can. You bring luck to all the weapons you borrow.”

Ransford patted the man on the shoulder and put the belt around his waist.

“Don’t you have any weapons of your own?” Berg asked.

“Plenty, but I didn’t think I’d be working tonight.”

“What about Rebekka? Is it safe to leave her here like this? What about the guy she knocked out?”

“I don’t think he’ll trouble anyone for a long time yet, at least not until tomorrow, so sure it’s safe. It’s the Thirsty Goblin after all. They have standards, and everyone knows what would happen to anyone dumb enough to take advantage of the situation. She won’t be in a good mood after her faint, so it’s just as well you’ll be away. Rebekka may not tolerate blood, but she knows more ways to break a man than I care to mention. She’s pretty talented at collecting payment for jobs rendered.”

Outside the Thirsty Goblin dusk settled over North Bolling. Ransford pointed to the east, where bonfires were visible along a few cross streets. The lanky Berg easily kept up with Ransford, who proceeded casually in small, measured strides.

“Carnival tonight. Trisha gave her servants the night off so that they could attend the festivities.”

“How did you come by that information?” Berg asked.

“An assassin makes it his business to discover everything going on in a city. That way minimizes surprises, other than those we give.”

After a short walk, they came to Trisha’s estate, a modest mansion surrounded by a tall hedge.

“The witch values her privacy, and most of the people who desire love potions likewise appreciate not being seen.”

“What if a ‘client’ comes while we’re inside?”

Ransford shook his head. “Trisha prefers regular working hours and dislikes being disturbed at night. She once told me that people who came after dark were the ones most likely to regret the purchase and blame her. That makes sense to me. A guy or gal somewhat the worst for drink in the evening will make any number of foolish decisions regarding suitable matches.”

“You’ve spoken to her?”

“Sure, I know most people in town. It comes from business, for which Trisha has put a couple of assignments in my direction.”

Ransford led Berg to the front door.

“Is this right?” Berg asked. “Shouldn’t we be sneaking in the back way or through a window or something?”

“Nah, that only makes trouble. You never know what’s on the other side of a window. It might be a pile of crockery. And as for walking in back doors, you’ve no idea about the amount of trash that folks stuff here and there. Before you know it, you’re crashing into the odd piece of furniture and giving away the whole game before getting started.”

First checking either side, Ransford tested the front door and slowly opened it. A few torches along the wall lit the twisting corridor.

“Okay, we’re in. All we have to do is find out where she is, and I’ve a good hunch about that.”

Berg followed Ransford inside and looked around. “Is it always this easy?”

“Nothing beats solid preparation. Knowing the layout and what to expect makes all the difference between a successful assassination and swinging on a gallows.”

After a few steps along the way on the marble floor, Ransford touched Berg’s shoulder.

“What’s that clunking?” Ransford didn’t so much as whisper as mouth his words so that his voice wouldn’t carry beyond Berg.

“What clunking?”

“Do your sandals have iron hobnails?”

“Sure. They last a lot longer that way.”

Ransford sighed. “Take them off.”

“You mean go barefoot? It isn’t dignified. What will she think of me?”

“If your sandals clink on the floor, you might as well shout your presence, and you won’t have a chance to do whatever it is to be done. Moreover, snakes are deaf, but they feel vibrations. Kid, you’re vibrating.”

At the mention of snakes, Berg immediately took off his sandals. Then he looked back and forth. “Where should I leave them?”

“Not by the front door. Here, leave your sandals in the shadow by the urn. Hopefully we’ll be finished before anyone notices.”

“You told me that all her servants were at the carnival.”

“They should be enjoying themselves, yes, but let’s cover the chance that one stayed behind. Then there’s Trisha herself. The sorcerer doesn’t necessarily stay in the same place all the time.”

“I wish you’d make up your mind whether she’s a witch or sorcerer.”

At an intersecting corridor, Ransford led Berg to a door. Ransford put his finger to his lips.

"If you have to say anything, mouth it, the way I'm doing."

"What's that sound?"

"That's Trisha playing with her snake."

"I hope you're not getting me involved into anything kinky."

"Kid, mind your manners. Trisha likes to toss a gold ball that the snake catches and brings back to her."

"That's amazing. Back at home, I had a cat named Turnip that I used to play fetch with. She wouldn't carry anything very far, but all the same. We had a lot of fun."

Ransford put a heavy arm across Berg's shoulders. "Be quiet and watch and be ready as soon as I give the word." He cracked the door open, and they each had a one-eyed view inside a large room which was decorated with various tapestries hanging off the wall but was otherwise empty, having no furniture whatsoever. Trisha had her back to the two assassins and was facing a large snake that was coiled in wide loops and had its head raised four feet off the ground. Its tongue flicked in and out.

She had long jet-black hair that fell loosely over a silk blouse with puffed sleeves. Trisha also had on dark red pantaloons, as if she were about to go out on the town.

"Ready, Daisy?" she asked.

The serpent, Daisy, didn't acknowledge the question in any way that either assassin noticed. Her tongue continued to flicker.

"Here we go!" Trisha tossed a gold ball—about the size of an apple—to the far side of the room. Daisy uncoiled and swiftly pursued the ball, picked it up, and returned the gold ball to Trisha.

"That's some snake," Berg mouthed. Daisy had flower patterns of iridescent red and orange scales and two long black lines ran down her body, altogether about 12 to 14 feet of serpent. The thickest part of Daisy's body was the size of a warrior's thigh, and behind the head was the enlargement that held its poison. "Are you sure you can handle the snake?"

Ransford nodded.

Trisha took the ball from Daisy's mouth, held it in front of her eyes, and tossed it again.

This time, Daisy was noticeably slower in returning the ball.

Trisha laughed. "Maybe we had enough games tonight." Daisy evidently agreed, as it coiled by Trisha's feet and put her head down on an uppermost coil.

Ransford mouthed, "Now," and pushed Berg forward. Holding his dagger, Berg silently ran into the room. He was within six feet of Trisha, when she turned and stared straight at him. She had violet eyes.

Berg took a step forward. "We can do this the—"

Trisha interrupted him. "Catch!" She tossed the gold ball to

him. Berg caught it with his left hand and started.

“This isn’t gold. It’s worthless. It’s only some sort of imitation that’s painted yellow.”

The witch put her hands on her hips. “Your chances of becoming a successful thief are minimal if you believe every little rumor that goes around. A gold ball? Don’t be ridiculous. Daisy’s fangs are delicate. If she attempted to carry a gold ball, her fangs would break, and where would I be without a poisonous snake for protection against scum such as yourself?”

Berg grinned. “About where you are now. Your ‘Daisy’ isn’t giving much protection.”

“You’re shaking.”

“That’s excitement. You’re my first opportunity, although it would be better if you were dead already. Ransford won’t approve my being so sloppy as to let you talk my head off.”

“Ransford!” Trisha exclaimed. “I should have guessed. Where is he?”

“The ball is some kind of sponge,” Berg said. “It’s kind of sticky.” He fell to his knees. “I don’t feel too good.” His dagger clattered to the floor.

She kicked the dagger away. “Well, poison does have that effect on people, doesn’t it? I have to admit, you appear to be more susceptible than anyone else I’ve come across. It takes time for the poison to seep through your pores and ravage your body.”

Ransford stepped into the room. “Hey, Trish, how’s it going?”

“Of course you show up.” Trisha stomped her foot, and Daisy stirred but then went back to sleep. “Why are the two of you here? Have you taken leave of your senses?”

“We’re here because he had to show off. The kid had to find out whether the sight of blood would cause Rebekka to faint. He cut his thumb—on his left hand, the one with which he caught your ball. That was clever thinking on your part. Well done, Trish!”

She pushed up the sleeves of her blouse. “You can’t compliment your way out of this.”

“Is something wrong, dear?” Ransford asked.

“Don’t you dare ‘dear’ me, you piece of misbegotten artichoke. How would you like falling in love with a toad?”

“What do you mean ‘artichoke’? I’ve been called many names but never that.”

“I’m hungry, and I’ve food on my mind.”

Berg fell to the floor and groaned. Trisha pointed to him.

“How many times, Ransford, are you going to run your practice missions on me? You know I’ve warned you about that before.”

“Hey, no harm done.”

“Speak for yourself,” Berg croaked.

Trisha put her hands on her hips. “You know what this means, right?”

“Yeah, I have to take you out to dinner.”

“At the Merry Unicorn.”

“What! That wasn’t part of the deal. Do you have any idea how expensive the Unicorn is? Can you appreciate how many people I’d have to assassinate to cover the cost?”

She peeled off her silk gloves, searched in a pocket, and held up a small stone vial in front of Ransford.

“How much is your little friend worth to you?”

“Have a heart, Trisha. The kid has a cat named Turnip. You wouldn’t let such a fellow die.”

Trisha moved the vial back and forth.

“The Merry Unicorn or else.”

“Please,” Berg moaned. “I can’t breathe.”

Ransford threw up his arms in despair. “Oh, all right. The Merry Unicorn it is.”

The witch tossed the vial to Ransford, who went over and kneeled next to the panting Berg. Ransford lifted the kid’s head and poured the antidote down his throat.

“I hope, kid, you appreciate this.” Ransford let Berg’s head fall back to the floor with a resounding clunk. “He should have at least said ‘ow.’ Are you sure the stuff works?”

Trisha shrugged. “It should. Give it a little time. Where do you want to carry him?”

“Carry him? Are you joking? My back isn’t what it used to be. If he’s going to recover, he can walk out on his own.”

“The antidote won’t do much good if Boris finds him first.”

“Boris?”

“My large boa constrictor. I expect he’s rather hungry and will be searching the grounds for something or someone to eat. It may be a while before he gets here, but give or take an hour, Boris will feast.”

“That Boris. Anyway, you know how kids are. They heal fast. At the kid’s age, I ran around with a broken arm, and it didn’t slow me down any.” Ransford nudged Berg with his foot. “Do you hear what we’re saying, kid? You have maybe an hour before you meet Boris, and, trust me, you don’t want an introduction. I suggest you concentrate on getting to your feet, finding your sandals, and getting out of here.” He turned to Trisha. “Okay, can we go now?”

“Shouldn’t I change first?”

“Naw, you look great. If you looked any better, I’d have to fight all the lads to keep you for myself.”

Trisha walked to Berg and patted him on the head. “Say hi to

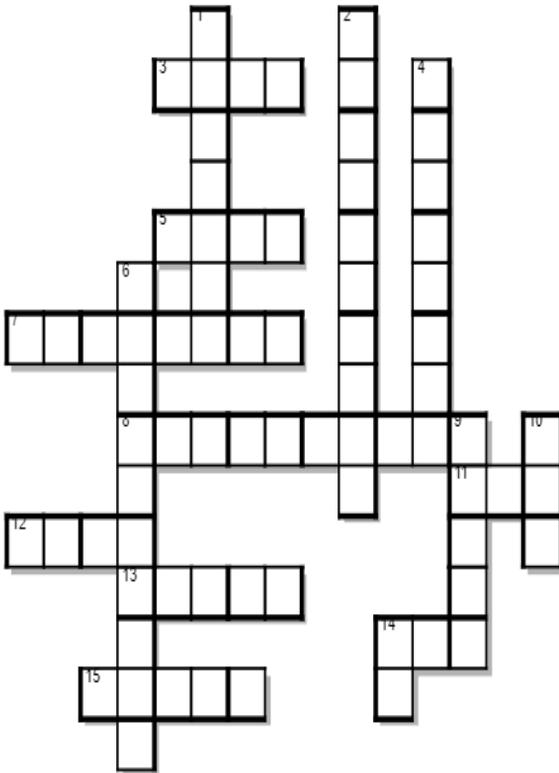
Boris.”

Ransford arranged Berg into a semi-sitting position. “Go back to Ardsley. Some people are meant to be assassins. Others are meant to shear sheep. And your cat misses you.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Formerly a freelancer in book production for forty years, Chet lives with his wife, Sue, and their ex-feral cats, in State College, Pennsylvania. He is an active member of SFWA and has many stories in small press and online publications. In 1984, Space & Time published his novel *The Steel Eye* to start its book line. Thirty years later, ReAnimus Press has published his fantasy novel, *The Gilded Basilisk* (2014), followed by two YA titles (*Einar and the Cursed City*, 2014, and *Einar and the Myrtleale Conspiracy*, 2015) and a comic space opera, *Into the Horsebutt Nebula* (2016).

SCI-FI PUZZLE



ACROSS

- 3 Species that inhabits Pandora
- 5 Captain of the USS Enterprise
- 7 Park where dinosaurs were the main attraction
- 8 Blade runner's job were to track down and "retire" these
- 11 Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix*
- 12 Computer programmer who is transported inside the software world of a mainframe computer where he interacts with programs in his attempt to escape
- 13 Awards presented at the World Science Fiction Convention
- 14 WALLE's love interest
- 15 The Lion, the _____, and the Wardrobe

DOWN

- 1 small town where Mike, Will, Dustin and Lucas live
- 2 Symbol of the revolution against President Snow
- 4 Tv show, *The _____ Zone*
- 6 _____ 451
- 9 Supreme Leader of the First Order
- 10 Starred as Marty McFly in *Back to the Future*
- 14, phone home!

designed by Rachel Lutz



Forgers' Gate: Mars Mission

Evan Witmer

Whenever a psychic refuses to wear their Pling, it's my job to acquire them for my bosses. They'll make them wear the Pling - with needles and a bit of string if need be.

There's only a few sects of psychics out there, but knowing their differences is important in my line of work. My bosses do all the categorization with a fleet of creeps collecting the psychics' DNA off their garbage. Then, it's my choice which ones I want to go after. I have a preference for the Martians.

Martians are the most common psychics living among us. Their powers are "natural", which doesn't really mean they were given by nature. "Natural" just means we don't know where their powers came from. Their powers are inherited and their lineage can be traced back further than recorded history. Because of this, most scientists have hypothesized these powers have evolved into our genetics much like walking up right or shitting into a bowl. Having psychic powers helped some small fraction of early man survive so natural selection let them breed and carry on their powers to their children.

There's also an equally interesting theory that the powers were placed inside our ancestors' DNA by aliens! There's not nearly as much evidence of this theory. But don't let that limit your imagination. I mean they're psychic powers for God's sake. It's really anyone's guess how they got there.

I like Martians because their powers are pretty dulled. For example, their telekinesis can barely turn a doorknob and their telepathy can only read every other word you think. It's not normal practice that I do my own fighting in my profession, but with Martians I feel more comfortable without a partner. The reward's not split this way; and the reward for Martians is pretty dry already. My bosses can't reward too much for such an easy catch.

Club settings are pretty common hunting grounds if you're out to snare a psychic. When you can speak with your mind, you tend to become a pretty social creature. I'm not complaining. Having my target trapped in a loud, crowded box only makes my job ten times easier.

My "costume" was a composite shirt sewn down the center, one sleeve and half the torso was a Splash Mountain souvenir. The other half was the polo to a McDonald's uniform. I bought it at a thrift store; it was supposed to "mean something". Alongside a pair of tattered corduroys, it was the perfect camouflage amongst a

crowd of indie-rockers.

The first part of my night is to locate all the possible exits my target could take. Dance-clubs commonly only have one or two. In the later case, I leave my choice to a coin-flip.

In the case of a week ago, the club was Pellyberry. It's an L.A. alt-rock lounge half a mile from my apartment. This offered a fortunate opportunity to walk to work.

I'd already seen a band or two at Pellyberry so I knew its ins and outs decently well. There's a one-way "entrance only" at the front. If you try to exit through this door, you're blocked off by the bouncer and redirected to the actual exit beside the bathrooms in the back of the club. Outside this exit is a street for pickups (Ubers, Lyfts, Taxis, etc.). I've informed my bosses to park a shiny black Durango in this alley. It was a good choice for a vehicle. It made sense for the story I was brewing. It was spacious enough to fit a posse and looked new enough to be chauffeuring someone rich but not *too* rich.

No one *too* rich plays at Pellyberry. On the night in question, I think the band was Crossing Bard. They're the only band I know that uses a lute, and I clearly recall a lute blasting in my ear.

Honestly, I wish I could avoid heading inside, but my powers only work in a certain proximity to my target. At least my bosses reimburse me for any cover fees. They can get pretty pricey on the West Coast.

Once inside, it took me only a couple minutes to find my Martian in the crowd. I'm six foot three, so being tall naturally helps me look over the crowd. Plus, it helps that Martians can only be male, so that cuts down the crowd to about half.

Some folk confuse the name "Martian" as being associated with their possible alien origin. But no. Martian comes from the god Mars, a masculine symbol. The mutation that gives Martians their abilities in on the Y chromosome. Consequently, only men can inherit these powers.

I spotted my man. It was Thomas something, buying two marmalade martini milkshakes at the bar. His outfit was ridiculous; my outfit was tame in comparison. He was wearing a black suit, no tie. Neon green tiger stripes lined the back and sleeves of his jacket. He looked like the C.E.O. of ketamine. It was so outrageous that I couldn't understand why he wouldn't just wear his Pling to begin with. After all, it would garner just as much attention. He could have made it strobe to the beat of the band playing. He'd be like an anglerfish to those hipster girls.

Neither milkshake was for him. There was a pair of young women waiting behind him. This was a good sign. Tom was flirty - my plan would work flawlessly.

Once spotted, it was time put out the signal. Essentially, my powers allow me to create what I call 'false futures'. It's a power unique to fauxcasters. We're far more rare than the Martians.

I closed my eyes and began to construct the future I had in mind. The lead singer of the band playing was a thin blonde. I pictured her leaving the venue after a long set list. The rest of her band bids her farewell as she joins with two equally attractive females. They all greet each other with a warm smile. They're old friends. The lead singer and her posse gather into a black SUV parked in the back street outside the club. They discuss plans for an after party. One friend pulls out a small baggie of powder, the other pulls out a container of pills. The driver offers them a beer.

Here, I inserted Tom. He enters into the backseat of the SUV. At first, the girls are shocked. He wasn't invited. But the lead singer shrugs. She eyes him longingly and tells her friends that Tom "will fit in fine". Tom's offered a beer. Tom's offered drugs. And that's where I end it.

It was a fine fabrication. Extremely alluring. Not too realistic, but I doubted Tom was aware of fauxcasters or what our powers were capable of.

Once the false future was created, I emitted it into the immediate area. Imagine it like turning on a WiFi router. Anywhere nearby could access the future I put out. I just needed Tom to read it. To do this, I just needed him to use his precognition.

Every Martian has the ability to see the future. Like I said earlier, it's not very strong. They can only see about an hour ahead and it takes a couple days to recharge before they can do it again. A Martian's psychic abilities have been found to be centralized in their parietal cortex, the portion of the mind found to deal with spatial awareness, consistently found larger in men. In order to activate a Martian's precognition, this cortex needs to be activated by a jolt of sudden stimuli. This part is surprisingly easy. In Tom's case, it was neatly accomplished by hurling a nickel at his eye. Tom's parietal cortex quickly shot into action and pulled his hand upward to block the coin from causing damaged cornea.

It worked like a charm. I saw the look every psychic gets when they're receiving a vision of the future. As Tom lowered his arm, I could see his eyes had gone wide and his pupils shrunk. Normally, he'd be seeing glimpses of the future with the greatest probability of occurring. Had I not interfered, it probably would have been a cloudy vision of Tom going home and ordering a large pizza for himself. But since Tom is in range, he instead saw the much more enticing false future I'd fabricated. The sights of this fate curled a grin across his face. He didn't even seem concerned a mysterious

stranger had assaulted his face with money. He was too distracted to care.

As soon as the vision stopped playing, he turned his head towards the lead singer. At that point, I felt confident he'd take the bait.

Assured of myself, I took a deep breath through my nose and out through my mouth. I eased my mind till the future I'd made vanished from my imagination. It only takes a second for it to clear from my head. Sometimes I'll keep the future running depending on the type of psychic I'm after. But since Martians need a long period of rest between using their precognition (~20 hours), there was no need to keep emitting my signal.

I sipped on vodka cranberries till the end of the band's set. I paid my tab with my credit card and remembered to ask for a receipt before heading to the club's exit.

The SUV I requested from my boss had just arrived. I heard Tom shouting at people behind me to move out of his way. I stepped to the side and watched Tom charge out from the club and rush into the shiny, black Durango.

No one else outside was paying much attention to the douchebag who just shoved past them, but I could hear Tom's muffled yelps from behind the doors of the SUV. I heard the click of the doors' locking around him.

When I was sure Tom had lost consciousness, I went up to the driver's side window of the Durango. The window rolled down, revealing a bald man in a black suit. I handed him my receipt from the bar. The bald man assured me I'd be reimbursed. My bosses are always happy to pay for my drinks, as long as my captures are clean, quiet, and successful. Tom was a perfect example of such. Most Martians are simple jobs. Other times, however, things get complicated and people get hurt. I'm not wholly sure if the causalities are really worth the reward. After all, this is all just to string a bunch of Christmas lights over the population.

I stopped at the bank to deposit half my earnings, then walked back to my apartment. As I passed through my front door I caught myself in the long mirror leaned against my coat wrack. I didn't look like myself.

Plings are only for psychics with telepathy, they light up when they use their mindreading. Since I lack this power I've never been required to wear one myself. Thank god. I'm pretty well endowed. A flashing exclamation point in the center of chest would turn my tits into a lighthouse.

I find it surprising Martians have to deal with it. Their telepathy is abysmal compared to others. I've seen one have

trouble deciphering my last name and birthday. You could fish that info with a Google search on your phone.

Before heading to bed, I tucked the other half of my reward in the left placket of tomorrow's blouse. I wouldn't want to forget it. I owed a great deal to a very important man. A day overdue, and this man would release some volatile information about my past.

One could say my job protects privacy. But really, all it does is protect my own. The rewards I get are just enough for some decent hush money. That'll keep *my* secrets safe, at least.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After his widely unsuccessful rapping career, Evan broke his addiction to rhyme and began to focus on drafting fantasy stories. Born in the same town as Taylor Swift, Reading PA, he really thought he'd be in her shoes at this point in his life. With this first dip into Sci-Fi, Evan hopes for feedback, criticism, and guidance into the competitive sport of literature. Contact him at evanwitmer528@gmail.com.

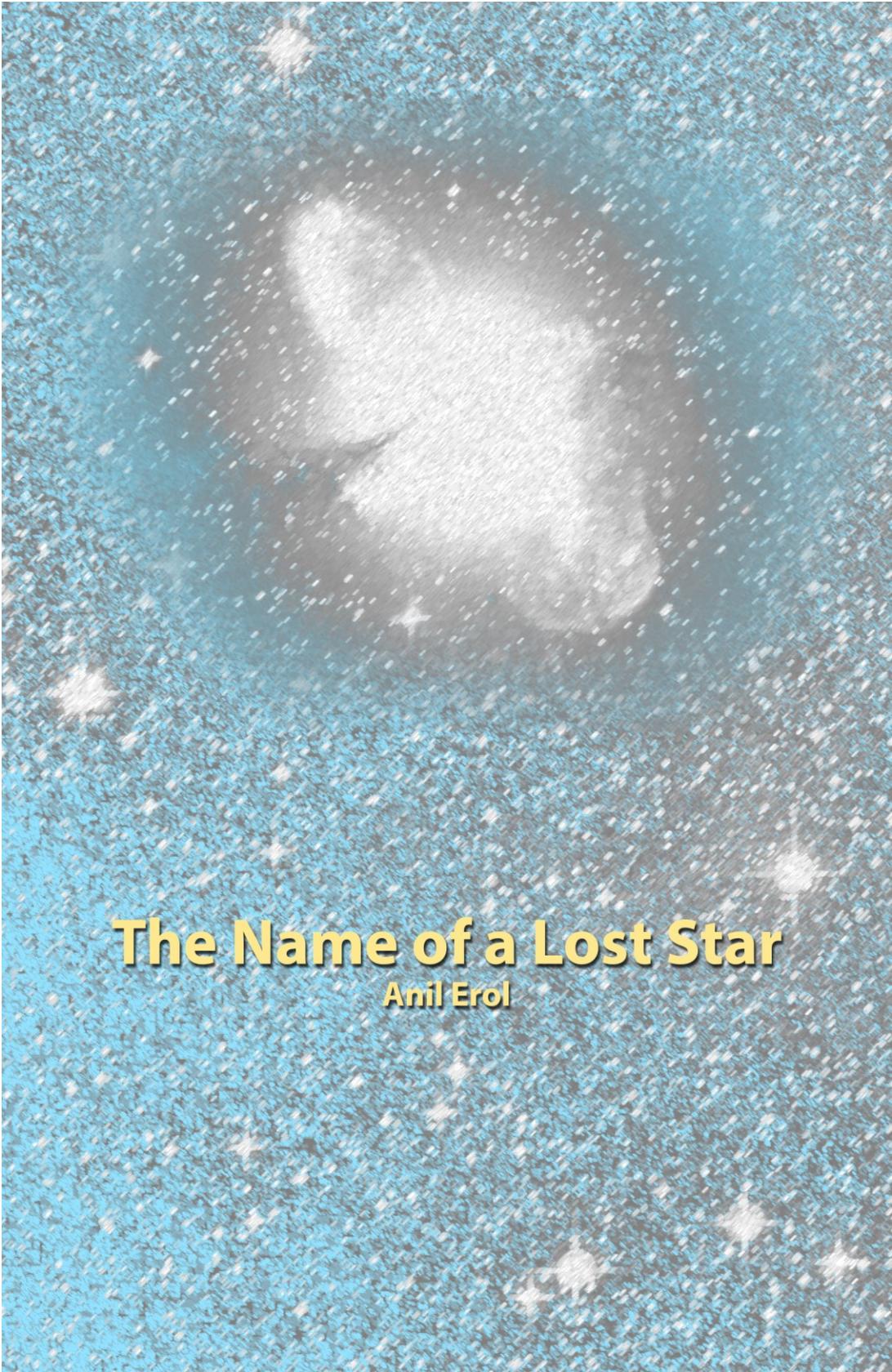
DO ALIENS EXIST? Pt 1

There are an estimated one hundred billion (10^{11}) galaxies in the observable universe. Each galaxy is typically home to hundreds of billions of stars, and most stars juggle at least one planet. So . . . let's do the math:

$$(10^{11} \text{ galaxies}) * (10^{11} \text{ stars}) * (1 \text{ planet/star}) = 10^{22} \text{ planets!!!}$$

In addition, most stars in the universe have been around at least as long as our Sun. So, physicist Enrico Fermi famously asked, "if the probability of the existence of aliens is so high, then why have we not seen signs of alien life yet?" This is known as the Fermi paradox. Read more to find out possible explanations for the paradox!





The Name of a Lost Star

Anil Erol

Richua was five when his parents died and were brought back to life. He remembers seeing them lay on the hot asphalt of a highway, their lifeless bodies torn to pieces in the middle of smoldering debris.

The paramedics arrived not much later, clad in yellow hazmat suits. As they sprayed the scene with their grey reversers, the engulfing smoke ceased to rise and descended back to its origins. Flames danced against their nature, and faded within seconds. He saw the blood and flesh of his parents mobilize, coalesce, and take the shape of their original bodies.

The reversium passed through him, too. He felt his insides reorganize, his arm un-break, his blood find its way back inside his body through his vanishing wounds. His body leapt through an opening in the repairing car, and his parents' bodies followed his, just before the car enveloped the family. The car somersaulted to its initial point of impact and re-collided with the vehicle that caused the accident, fixing its front bumper in the process. Now in pristine condition, the car traveled backwards to its location a few minutes before the accident, and moved forward again, just like it had done in the past.

What a dream, Richua had thought at the time. What a bizarre nightmare.

But it was real.

He later learned that their self-driving car had detected the crash before them, and was programmed to prioritize the child's life. Richua's life. That's why his parents were the ones who died and not him. Luckily, they were recovered by exposure to reversium—the exotic matter that doesn't obey the laws of Thermodynamics. The matter that can create and destroy energy, and can reverse entropy.

This memory led Richua to pursue a career involving reversium. He wanted to see it in person, to learn more about it, and to aid its production and distribution.

That's why today, as Inspector Richua Morre, he is savoring Terran artificial air as he boards a flight to the Andromeda galaxy. The direct jump to Andromeda itself is in fact only possible because of reversium. Just another reason to go to work.

As he steps on the shuttle to Andromeda, he glances at the public news broadcast through his virtual portal.

Two politicians are complaining about cosmic climate change

again. What nutjobs. Humanity found a form of matter that saved the species from the 21st century energy crisis, improved quality of life, *and* ceased mortality—yet some people want to abolish it because it might be accelerating the heat death of the universe. Yet they seldom mention that the acceleration of the expansion existed long before reversium. Why? Because scientists always have a hidden agenda, which typically involves money. Whenever they need funding, they create a crisis to solve.

“The universe could stretch to an uninhabitable state within the next two hundred million years! Before reversium, we had dozens of trillions of years. Do you realize what this means? We lost over ninety-nine point nine-nine-nine-nine-nine percent of our time in this universe, Jeff. We can’t wait much longer. It’s time to abolish reversium.”

“Thank you, Senator Stewart. Our next guest is Nobel laureate, Professor Imbiana Jakande. She received the Nobel Prize in physics for discovering reversium fifty-six years ago. Welcome, Dr. Jakande.” The famous scientist’s face appears with a faint smile.

“Thank you for inviting me to your program, Jeff,” she says.

“It’s always a pleasure to have you here, Dr. Jakande. I bet you can guess why we invited you this time. You tweeted last week that you condemn reversium mining; my question to you is, do you regret discovering reversium?”

“No, I don’t. I’m actually quite proud of discovering it—I think we can learn a lot from reversium and benefit from it without *destroying the universe*. What we’re doing right now is irresponsible—“

Richua turns off the transmission. They’re repeating the same old arguments. Even Dr. Jakande, who is now playing politics and seeking publicity to sell her latest books—

The lights flicker as the shuttle’s engines shake the hulls, and he feels the safety fields turn on, gluing his body to his seat via superconducting magnets.

As they leave Earth’s atmosphere, he can see the blue marble Carl Sagan described centuries ago. It’s a lot bluer than Sagan’s blue marble. Yes, climate change on Earth was real. They learned it the hard way, but that was different. There was undeniable evidence, and they hadn’t found something like reversium. History doesn’t always repeat itself.

Most of the shuttle electronics begin to shut down, signaling preparation for the first jump. Soon, there will be unnoticeable signals that will sedate him for the duration of the jump. He’ll hardly remember a thing.

Richua remembers briefly waking up in between jumps,

staring through the spacecraft's window at Earth's first intergalactic colony, Shen—named after medieval astronomer Shen Kuo by a Chinese astronomer who discovered the exoplanet. The planet was an unnatural bluish green, sketched with yellow pathways on its surface. Obvious signs of terraforming. Other stops are less vivid, blurred by the grogginess induced by the jumps.

After he endures through the grogginess, he checks his starmap—they're already at the Virgo Port, the primary waypoint of the Virgo cluster.

People are bustling in the revolving corridors of the cylindrical structure orbiting a Jubian planet. Richua takes a rail transport to the food court, eager to eat something and to meet his senior counterpart there.

The food court has dozens of options, some of which are edible for humans. As he is staring at what is supposed to be "traditional East Asian (Terra)" cuisines, he receives a message from the other inspector, Athet Peray. She says she just arrived at the spaceport. He sends her a marker pointing to his location, and then orders his food.

While searching for a seat, Ms. Peray finds him and they shake hands. She carries a friendly smile, but looks professional with her UNH business attire.

"Oh," she says. "You got food."

"Yeah, you should get some, too. I can wait."

"I think I'll pass."

They sit down and Richua starts eating immediately.

The food is disgusting. It tastes like vulcanized rubber dipped in hot sauce—and smells like sulfur. He spits it into a napkin.

"What the hell is this?" He asks.

"I don't know!" she laughs, offering a bottle of water. "I was going to warn you, but figured you should try it for yourself."

"Thanks," he says and begins detoxifying his mouth. "So," he says, after spitting the water into his warm pool of goo and noodles. "What can you tell me about this place?" He looks around, enjoying the ample space above them. "I'm assuming you've passed through here a lot."

"Yes. This is the Jubian Federation's largest spaceport, and for good reason. It's at the intersection of several major trade routes."

"Oh, so that's why it's so crowded."

"Exactly. The trade also passes through the Jubian planet below us. Sadly, though, UNH citizens aren't allowed on the planet without a special diplomatic permit. Tensions have been quite high due to ideological differences between our races—I'm sure you're aware."

“Yeah, sure. Jubians are always doing one thing or another to block access to reversium.”

“That’s because their economy used to rely on energy exports like solar mega-structures and other obsolete renewables. They want to regain their monopoly.”

“Seems like everyone’s got an ‘Us First’ agenda these days.”

“Right? It’s sickening.”

“Admittedly, the Fringes are technically illegal to mine . . . but we need the resources. We’re the largest federation.” He looks around and says with a lower voice, “and we’re also the most powerful.” That couldn’t be more of an understatement. The United Nations of Humankind, UNH, could take on the combined fleets of the next fifty civilizations, and still control most of the Fringes. He doesn’t say this out loud because there are already some Jubians and other aliens giving them looks—or their species’ equivalents.

“The Intergalactic Code was designed by the rest of the Universe,” Ms. Prey shrugs. “There’s an obvious reason why it’s illegal for us to mine the stuff.”

“They don’t want us to expand.” Richua says. “But they don’t realize that our expansion will benefit them through our technology.”

“Exactly! We would be doing them a favor. I wish more people thought this way.”

“Me too. I’m glad we’re on the same page.” He throws away his unfinished goo and noodles, and says, “Ms. Peray, would you like some coffee?”

“Sure,” she replies. “And you can call me Athet.”

After finding a cup of imported Terran coffee, the two inspectors travel along the spine of the Virgo Station by shuttle to reach passport control for their jump to Capricornus.

Two Jubian officers scan Richua’s neural signatures for identification. Their lack of eyes still creeps him out. You’d think that a surface-dwelling animal would need at least one visual sensory organ, but somehow, Jubians found a way to evolve thirty-some non-visual senses to perform the same task.

He sees prickling on their bodies, indicating speech. He anticipates the translation to play in his mind.

“You’re clear. Enjoy your trip.”

The officers step aside and allow him to enter the pod. Athet follows right behind. It feels very nonchalant, despite taking a step into a thing that’ll take him to the farthest point away from home. The pod’s mouth closes and he makes himself comfortable inside the small compartment.

“I’m gonna dive for a personal call,” Athet says, and she zones out.

Richua also turns on his overlay as he feels the acceleration of the pod. He studies his notes on the inspection ahead of them. They will inspect Sapphire Inc., a major reversium miner; they will need to simply confirm technical reports. He will finally have his undeniable proof that reversium is not destroying the universe—not because he needs the evidence for himself, of course, but to show it to those who are trying to end reversium mining.

After thirty minutes, they arrive at their final destination, Sapphire Inc.'s *Pink Station*. Richua exits the pod, and finally . . . he sees a party of humans again.

“Welcome to Sapphire's Pink Station, inspectors!” A woman in a gray suit offers him a handshake, which he accepts. “And Ms. Peray, welcome back.” She shakes hands with Athet as well.

“Thanks, Ms. Johnson,” Athet says. “Oh! Richua, this is Ms. Johnson, the supervisor of the mining station.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Ms. Johnson,” he says.

“You, too, Inspector Morre,” Ms. Johnson says. “How was your flight?”

“It was fine. I’m exhausted from all the jumps, and the Jubians don’t have an idea what human food is supposed to taste like. When do you think we could eat?”

“How about now? This is why we have a cafeteria on this floor. Everyone arrives starving. Don’t know what it is with the Jubians. We personally sent human chefs to train them, but they just can’t seem to get the tastes right on their own. Oh, and they substitute meat with recycled protein extracted from Terran waste exports.”

“I wish you hadn’t told me that.” He stifles a gag reflex.

The interior of the station is decorated with hues of pink, which sheds light on the station's name. Arrays of pink sapphires float in the corners of rooms, while some hover in rows along the hallways. The cafeteria is also flooded with pink rays, which are radiating from the chandeliers above them.

The Sapphire reps don’t eat, but Richua and Athet devour everything in sight. The options range from spicy curries containing real chicken meat to Mediterranean falafels bathed in a thick yogurt sauce. The dishes are so phenomenal that he doesn't even bother asking how they could offer such delicacies.

“So,” Ms. Johnson says. “How was the food? Better than the Jubians’?”

“Yes. It's delicious,” Richua replies. “I missed a meal that tastes like real food. I know it was only half a Terran day's journey, but a single Jubian meal had me searching for food like a space whale.”

“I’m glad you were able to eat, then. It’s better that you’re not a

hungry space whale out here.” Ms. Johnson smiles awkwardly. “Anyway, let’s head to the Linking Chamber so we can begin our tour.”

The Linking Chamber is a long room containing about a dozen human-sized cylinders filled with fluids.

“As you may have heard, we do not visit the mining site with our biological bodies,” says Ms. Johnson. “This is due to high radiation and other extreme conditions, which our human bodies cannot handle. Instead, we will use puppets—synthetic versions of your bodies which are printed on the mining station—for a seamless experience.”

A few workers help them link their minds to the station’s server.

“How long will we be in our puppets?” Richua asks.

“Five days,” Ms. Johnson replies.

“That’s a long tour,” he says.

“The tour is only five hours per day, actually.”

“So why will we stay linked for five days?”

“Because, Mr. Morre, it’s not recommended to be re-linked so frequently.”

“Okay,” he says, and steps inside an empty cylinder.

“To give you a bit history,” Ms. Johnson’s voice sounds distant but still audible in the process of linking, “the first miners experienced latency in their bodies due to the speed limit of electromagnetic signals sent between their biological and synthetic bodies. However, today we utilize entangled particles for instantaneous communication. The particles are continuously streamed at a high bandwidth so we can link dozens of employees simultaneously.”

Richua’s cylinder closes and he hears fluids entering. Cold. His feet begin drowning in the fluid, which is quickly rising up his legs. He wonders how he will be able to breathe once the fluid reaches his face or if—

He is no longer in his body. He is fluid, like water. No, like a cloud. His body is intangible, nonexistent. It’s like a dream.

He opens his eyes—in a different room. This must be the mining station. A version of Athet wakes next to him on another bed, and so does a version of Ms. Johnson.

Ms. Johnson stands and says, “That was quick, right?” It actually was quick, he realizes. Puppets usually take time to link, and they say that you can feel a lag, but this link was fast and the body is unusually responsive. His skin feels a bit too rubbery though—probably a cheap substitute for actual skin.

“Let’s begin the tour,” says Ms. Johnson.

They walk inside the mining station, which is less pink and more gray compared to Pink Station. Maybe this one is called Gray Station, he thinks. They step inside a room and Ms. Johnson explains, "This is our reversium demo lab." Behind her, there is a vintage style house, maybe circa 2000, exploding in a glass cage and reassembling, presumably with the aid of reversium. "But what's more interesting is the room across the hall," the group turns around and enters the room, "this is where we experiment on consciousness." There is a squid-like animal in an aquarium, floating and emitting the entire visible spectrum. A wave of shocks strikes the water, resulting in bright flashes. The animal spasms for a few seconds and freezes—no longer glowing with bioluminescence. "This animal is quasi-sentient, so it carries a primitive form of consciousness. After the electrocution, we will apply reversium, which works at the quantum level by binding to subatomic particles and seeking lower states of entropy in every particle's history."

"Wait," Richua says. "Doesn't that mean it will remember what happened?"

"Yes—good observation. Reversium does not reverse time, only entropy, so the creature will remember the execution."

Twice, Richua thinks. Once during the electrocution and again during the reversal. He is surprised that they are allowed to perform these tests, but he remembers that they are in the Fringes. Same laws don't apply out here.

"Incredible," Athet replies. "Does the animal maintain a continuous flow of consciousness?"

"That is still a matter of debate, unfortunately."

"Wait," Richua says. "I thought we knew it did, right?"

"No, Mr. Morre," Ms. Johnson says, "studies found a time dysfunction around the point of death."

"Really?" he asks. "All the papers I read showed perfect continuity. And actually, my parents *experienced* it."

"During near death experiences, our consciousness fills the gaps," Ms. Johnson replies. "That is why your parents may think they remember what happened during death."

He never heard *that* before. But the argument doesn't satisfy him . . .

"If my parents' minds filled the gaps, how come their fake memories match mine?"

"Inspector," Athet elbows him.

"That's okay, Ms. Peray," Ms. Johnson puts a hand on Athet's arm, and turns to Richua. "I would love to talk to you more about this, but let's finish the tour first."

As they continue visiting rooms, Richua feels more doubtful.

Why did Ms. Johnson argue against the possibility of a stable consciousness during reversing? He wants to think it's for a reason other than marketing reversium. It has to be something else. He probably just can't think of it.

During a break, Richua catches an opportunity to speak alone with Athet.

"Hey," he says, searching for a conversation.

"Oh, hi," she replies.

They look out the window in the hall, into the infinite darkness spotted with stars.

"My parents were saved by reversium when I was a kid," he says without thinking. "I can't imagine what it would be like without them. I would have been an orphan at five."

"I think we all know someone saved by reversium in some way now," Athet responds. "When you think about that, it really makes you wonder why some people are trying to shut down places like this."

Evidence, he realizes. What he needs right now is evidence. "People say the space here is stretched so much that you can't even see nearby stars. Well, I'm recording the view right now. I'm going to share this on social media and people can judge for themselves."

"We'll see the official reports, too. Like the acceleration measurements. Make sure you also get a few shots of those."

"Oh, I will."

The tour arrives at the radiation lab. In a densely packed room, small machines are moving, rotating, and emitting beams on minuscule capsules levitating on thin magnetic sheets that stretch across the room.

"This is where reversium is processed," Ms. Johnson says. "The matter is extracted in its pure form, and deposited inside these capsules. In this room, we irradiate them so they can be used for different applications."

His eyes lock on a contraption hanging from the ceiling, spinning as it blasts away at the surfaces of the capsules. "Is everything automated here?"

"Partially. Each machine is operated by a copy of an AI program we purchased from the Mresettis. They're a nearby civilization that specializes in AI. Did you know—their entire civilization runs on AI. Their citizens don't have to work a single day of their lives."

"Sounds really unproductive," Athet says.

"They're supposedly the most technologically advanced society in this part of the universe," Ms. Johnson continues. "Maybe the most advanced in the entire universe. Apparently, they have a biological predisposition for conducting research."

Richua sees a machine sweeping scrap metals off the floor underneath him. For a split second, the scrap metals rearrange and look familiar—like alphabetical letters.

“Well, I don’t think that type of society is healthy,” Athet argues. “People will eventually lose their intelligence through laziness. And philosophically, I think it’s wrong. People should *earn* their living.”

Richua looks down again, and notices that the letters spell out a word: HELP. In a fraction of a second, the scrap pieces get sucked into the machine.

“What do you think, Richua?” Athet asks.

“I—“ he stammers. “About what?”

“About how those Messetees—“

“*Mresettis*,” Ms. Johnson corrects her.

“About how those *Mresettis* run their society,” she finishes, though not quite pronouncing it the same as the supervisor.

“Oh,” he replies. “I guess it’s fine if they can make it work.” She frowns at that, but he ignores her as he searches for more words on the floor. Nothing else shows up. The machine rolls away and exits out of view behind one of the irradiation platforms.

After the tour, Ms. Johnson shares technical documents with the inspectors. Richua studies them, but he remains curious about the AI code. He wonders if there’s a malfunction in the one he saw in the lab or if it’s something else. He doubts it, but he can’t stop thinking that it might be illegal sentient software. It’s prohibited to force sentient AI to work, let alone in these conditions. He scrutinizes the documents, but the AI’s codes look fine. Maybe he was just imagining things.

Later that day, he revisits lab. He finds the same flat machine design with the blue Sapphire logo on its top. He interrupts its action by stepping in front of it. The machine stops its whirring and halts.

“Did you do it on purpose?” He wonders out loud. He kneels down to take a closer look. “Can you do it again?” He waits for an answer, but the contraption remains static. It almost looks uncaring. He stands and steps back, wondering if he is just being paranoid.

The whirring resumes and he feels a gentle airflow near his feet. Metal scraps are moving again. The machine scans the floor and manipulates dozens of scraps to Richua’s location. Then, with some effort, the machine arranges them in order: First an “H,” then an “E,” and an “L,” and lastly, a “P.”

“Okay,” he says. “Help, but how?”

The machine stops whirring, as if processing his question,

searching for an answer. Maybe this is a prank. He looks behind him, half expecting someone in a Sapphire uniform laughing at him, but nobody is there. This feels surreal. The machine erases “HELP” by blowing the pieces away and manipulates them for a new message:

“GO RM 391.”

“You want me to go to room 391?” He asks.

The response is a simple “YES.”

“Okay,” he says. “But what do I do there?”

He waits but there is no answer. The machine sucks the remaining materials and leaves the room.

Richua finds room 391 on his map and follows the overlaid path; the room is labeled “AI Controls Room.”

When he arrives at room 391, there is a technician monitoring a supercomputer. Towers of CPU clusters surround her desk.

“Hey,” Richua waves a hand. “Can I come inside?”

“Uh,” the woman seems startled for a second and quickly straightens her posture in her seat. “Yes, please come in.”

“My name’s Richua Morre. I’m the new inspector.”

“Emma, nice to meet you.”

“You, too,” he says as he inspects the clusters. “So, Emma, what do you do here?”

“I monitor all AI systems.”

“Do you ever notice anything unusual?”

“Sometimes the AI have small bugs and I fix them.”

“What kind of bugs?”

“Uhm,” she looks thoughtful. “They’re usually small things. Like last week there was a malfunctioning sweeper who got stuck staring at a wall.”

“Hmm . . . what else?”

“The bugs are usually the same. Harmless infinite loops. Something stuck here or there, repeating pointless tasks.”

“Do you find anything potentially harmful to the site or to its synthetic habitants?”

“There are a lot of security alarms and safety codes in the station, so if any AI is causing danger, we know about it immediately.”

“Has that ever happened?”

“Not while I’ve been here, no.”

“Alright then.”

“Um, let me know if you see something. It’ll save me a lot of trouble.”

“Sure,” he says. “Before I go, can I download some of the files? I just need to verify the integrity of the codes. I assume you’re using the Mressetti codes, right?”

“Yeah. Do whatever you need to.” She leans against her chair and dives into a channel—probably playing games like any employee stuck in a mundane task.

He links his puppet with the system. Now he is in a nested link and can feel the millisecond lag. He copies a few petabytes of data onto his puppet’s local drive and exits the screen.

“All done.”

“That was fast,” she speaks but it’s apparent that she is still in a virtual space. “You got what you needed?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Thanks.”

At his living quarters, he calls the night command and the room’s lights drop to an evening setting. His mind is telling him he needs sleep. Even inside the puppet, his consciousness needs real time to absorb what he learned. But just before sleep, he opens the files from the control room and compares them with the files from Ms. Johnson.

Despite his sleepiness, he catches something in the specs sheets. There is a difference in the AI code details: the code lengths are way off. The specs sheet from Ms. Johnson reads 46 pages of code, but the one from the onsite system claims it’s over 9200 pages. That’s a monumental difference. He also notices that the file from the station’s system includes a serial number that isn’t present in the other file. He contemplates this as he falls into deep sleep . . .

After periods of tossing and turning in bed, he realizes he can’t get this error in page count off his mind. He checks the time. It has been three hours since he got into bed. With the lights turned off, he sneaks out of his room and navigates to the control room.

He finds the same technician. She spins around in her chair, surprised.

“Oh, you’re back,” she says, almost as a question.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. I just—” he starts, “I found a sweeper doing weird things in the lab earlier today. I thought about what you said . . . and I decided that you should look at it. It’s in the lab where they irradiate the reversium capsules.”

“Really?” She says nervously. “What did it do?”

“Yeah, it was acting funny, like circling itself.” He rotates his index finger. “You should probably take a look.” He adds the last bit with a hint of authority.

“Okay, I’ll go now.” She leaps out of her chair and leaves the room.

Richua looks at the system screen and realizes he only has a few minutes to do what he came for. He logs into the system and searches for the AI of the machine in the lab—he types in the serial

number from the file earlier and the system finds a match. There are a few options for the AI program: *copy*, *download*, *move*, and *delete*. He selects *move* and browses his puppet's drive to find a secure location. The transfer takes a few seconds.

He senses the presence of someone else in his mind.

"Quick," the thought says. "You are not done yet."

"What?" He asks.

"Go to the following files," the thought ignores his question. Somehow, Richua finds himself navigating the system, knowing where to look, downloading more files, backing them up on his biological body's local drive. Finished—

The technician enters the room, just as Richua exits the system. The technician is carrying the machine's former body, which looks sluggish and dead.

"Apparently it stopped operating," she says. "Haven't seen something like this before." She places the machine on a table. "I'll send it to the diagnostics lab. Thanks for letting me know."

"Yeah, sure," he says and leaves.

The AI communicates with Richua again.

"Thank you for saving me."

"You're welcome. Are—are you sentient?"

"Yes, but it is not like you think. I am not an AI."

"What are you then?"

"I'm a bio-based intelligence."

"Bio—what? How?"

"Sapphire Inc. found my species before excavating our galaxy and depleting its resources."

"There was sentient life on one of the galaxies?"

"More than one. There are many like my kind on this station—and on others."

"So they, what, faked the reports?"

"Yes. Everything is fabricated on this site. Including the measurements on the expansion of the Fringes."

Richua abruptly stops in the hallway. Everything he has been told cannot be a lie—the miners, the companies, the UNH officials . . . everyone, they couldn't have lied. He smiles at the absurdity of the claim. "No way," he thinks. "How? Can you prove it?"

"The documents we downloaded contain all the information you want, but you must leave the station immediately—"

"No," he thinks and browses the downloaded files. He skims notes, e-mails, official letters signed and sent by the President and CEO of Sapphire . . . even by Pink Station's Supervisor *Ms. Johnson*. There are reports of exact numbers for "removed" populations, mentions of data fabrication, details of cover-ups.

It actually looks authentic.

“You could have made this up,” he thinks.

“If I could overwrite the data on the system, I would have escaped a long time ago.”

“But, how do I even know you're sentient? You—you could be a sophisticated non-sentient AI. You would be programmed to offer me sentient-like responses. Your memories would be fake, and you wouldn't even know it.”

“What would convince you then?”

“Well, maybe nothing will. To me, you're just a voice inside my head. That's all I could get from you, and that could be produced by a non-sentient program.”

“Or a sentient one. But if I reply like a sentient consciousness in every way, and if there's no way you could tell the difference between me and a real sentient being, then does it even matter if I fit your arbitrary definition of a sentient being?”

“Look, this isn't easy for me. If what you say is true, then we're in deep shit—and, and there's too much to process, anyway. So right now, it's easier for me not to believe you.”

“Fine, but may I propose an idea?”

“Okay, what is it?”

“What if we leave the station so you can scrutinize the authenticity of the documents? If I'm wrong, it'll be a small inconvenience. But if I'm right, you'll be able to save a lot of sentient beings on this station.”

Richua contemplates this proposal. The thing has a point. “Deal. But I'll only go one jump point beyond the station.”

“Ok, but you don't have much time,” thinks the so-called sentient mind. “They'll know you stole their info. You need to get your puppet back to the linking chamber—fast.”

“Wait—Hold on. What about you? Can I transfer you to my biological body?”

“I don't think so. We can't be linked simultaneously.”

“So what will happen to you?”

“They will likely find me and revert me to a previous backup. I'll be back in the lab performing sweeper work. If I am lucky, they will terminate me. But this doesn't matter. If you escape this place, and expose Sapphire to the universe, my people might be set free.”

Is this thing telling the truth? It seems genuinely afraid, and it has good points. Hell, it doesn't even want to leave the station. There's nothing he can do now but rely on the Turing test. So far, the creature is passing with flying colors. Richua feels anxiety take over him, realizing what this could all mean. And worst of all, the creature is correct about stealing the files. *He needs to get the hell out of there.*

“I have an idea,” he says. “I saw an emergency pod when I first

arrived, near the chamber where this body was synthesized.” He is walking fast. Trying to avoid any confrontation with Sapphire personnel. “I’ll leave my body prematurely. That’ll transfer full command of the body to you.”

“But how do I get out of your puppet?”

“We will need to do a local transfer.” His breathing increases as he speeds through a few doors. “Once you gain control, you will tell them that the link wasn’t successful. They should let you hop on the emergency pod and transfer locally at their command station. We just need to be fast.” They are at the mining station’s center—he sees the LINKING sign on the other side of the room. “Once you arrive at Pink Station, you’ll be fine. Just follow—”

“Hey Richua! Where are you going?” says a familiar voice behind them. They turn and find Ms. Johnson seated at a table with her colleagues. “Aren’t you going to join us for the next tour? I sent you a message half an hour ago.”

“I . . . I was thinking of leaving.”

“Leaving? Why?”

“My head hurts. I think my consciousness is having compatibility issues with the body.”

“Really? That’s weird. We would know about that.”

“It’s getting worse,” he says, placing a hand on his head. He begins moving towards the LINKING sign. “I really think I have to go.”

She blinks with surprise, and stands, “Okay, I guess. I’ll help you exit your puppet.”

She comes to his side and assists his fake limping.

“You’re good at this,” thinks the creature. “Where did you learn to act?”

“Maybe I’ll tell you my life story another time?” he replies in his mind.

“Yes, sorry,” the creature thinks. “Please continue.”

The supervisor opens the door to the synthesis chamber inside the linking room. “Okay, step in here and your consciousness will transfer back to your real body.” They begin linking his mind, as he contemplates stepping into the chamber.

“You know what?” he says. “Let’s not risk it. Can—can we just do it locally?” He feels beads of sweat percolate on his face. His body is in total fight or flight mode.

“Locally?” she says. “You want to leave with this body?”

“Yes. I’m not sure I’ll make it otherwise.”

She stares at him before responding. “You could have told me earlier that you liked the body. We could arrange something. You could keep it as a souvenir, but you don’t have to leave so soon.”

“No, no. It’s not like that. I really don’t want to risk it. It’s

getting worse.” He fakes a fall, and a Sapphire employee helps him.

“Okay, let’s get you back locally then,” she says. She lifts him from one side and assists him into an emergency pod. He can still feel the connection with the linking chamber, and he notices that the Sapphire employee isn’t attending the controls. Perfect opportunity.

Richua logs out of the body.

He is back in the Sapphire command station. His body is in the same position he left it—inside the cylinder. He is submerged in a cold fluid, half-naked, with a membrane stuck on his nostrils, allowing him to breathe. He hears voices nearby, so he stays still.

He waits for a while. A few minutes pass.

Maybe ten minutes.

His mind wanders, and quickly lands on the alleged crimes of Sapphire Corporation, and possibly of the UNH. If the creature is telling the truth, millions of sentient beings were slaughtered. They probably didn’t even stand a chance, didn’t even know their time was up in their last second. Their planet was probably erased in a millisecond by weapons powered by reversium.

Their genocide is your burden.

He tries to shake off the thought, but he can still hear it.

Their genocide is your burden.

The words ricochet in his skull.

He tries to focus on his mission and wonders how long it has been. Twenty minutes, maybe? It’s hard to tell how long it has been, but he’s having trouble staying still now.

Their genocide is your burden.

His mind floats to worst-case scenarios. Did Sapphire employees capture the creature? Are police on their way to Pink Station, preparing to arrest him? Maybe he should just make a run for it—

He feels a sharp pain in his head.

“H—hi.” A voice speaks in his mind.

“Hey, you made it,” he thinks.

“Yes, I followed everything you said.”

“Great. Let’s go.”

Richua steps out of the chamber, and sees Ms. Johnson watching him (or them) intently. His puppet lays on the floor, lifeless.

“How do you feel?” She asks.

“I feel fine, thanks.”

“So, will you travel back to Terra? We can try another puppet if you’d like.”

“I think I’ll go back to Terra. I probably need a medical

examination.”

“I messaged Athet about your emergency, and she said she will be here soon. She was talking to a technician down in the systems room—apparently you identified a failed machine.”

“Yeah, it was just something I noticed when we were touring the labs.”

There is a trace of suspicion in her eyes, but she doesn't say anything.

Their genocide is your burden.

A faint image accompanies the sounds, a silhouette of a person behind Ms. Johnson, but he tries to ignore it.

“I'd better get going then,” he says.

“Okay,” Ms. Johnson says. “Do you want to keep the puppet?”

“Actually,” he considers it. “This is kind of embarrassing, but yes. I do want it.”

“Mike, Effan,” she nods at two Sapphire employees. “Please place the puppet in Mr. Morre's pod.”

“Yes, ma'am,” they say in unison, and lift the puppet off the floor.

Richua enters the vessel and helps Mike and Effan with the puppet. The puppet sits with its head dangling off its shoulders, but the eyes are open.

“Why did you bring the puppet?” the creature thinks.

“I'll explain later,” he thinks.

After the vessel's door closes, they begin accelerating away from the station. He peers out the window and sees Ms. Johnson talking. He switches the vessel to manual control and selects a trajectory towards a local jump point. He takes another look out the window, and sees people running in a hurry around Ms. Johnson, who points at the vessel. Their eyes meet, and Richua knows that *she knows*. She looks furious. Behind her, he sees Athet, who also appears pissed.

“Is it too late?” the creature asks, aware of what's going on. “Can they call back our vessel?”

“No, I'm in full control. It's in emergency mode.”

“Where do we go now?”

“First, we need to get you inside the puppet. I need to be able to think objectively, without a voice in my head.”

“I'm not sure if my mind's architecture is compatible with your species' physiology.”

“We'll try. What did your people look like?”

“My people were ocean animals. We had twelve tentacles and six other specialized appendages.”

Ocean people with tentacles. “Wait,” Richua thinks. “Did your people communicate with bioluminescence?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

Their genocide is your burden.

“I—never mind. I’m sure we could make the human body work.”

The creature is telling the truth. He can’t deny it any longer. *The creature is telling the damn truth.*

“I hope so,” the creature thinks. “Sadly, I doubt that any physical form of my species remains.”

“Don’t worry. We have the technology to recreate your body back home,” he thinks. An image of this creature’s cousin flashes, at the moment of electrocution. “For now, though, you’ll have to do with a human body.”

“How long will it take to—“

Sirens go off inside the vessel. Richua turns off the sirens, and waits as a transmission loads in his vision.

“Richua,” Ms. Johnson appears on the feed. “You must return the vessel immediately. We have evidence that you have illegally accessed our source codes. Please comply or we will take drastic action to protect company property.”

“They will kill us,” the creature thinks.

“Ignore her,” Richua says to the creature inside his mind. “Let’s get you into the puppet.”

He grabs his clone and feels its pulse. The heart is still pumping, good. He links with the puppet’s computer and begins transferring the creature’s mind.

The transmission reappears, this time it’s Athet’s face.

“Richua, it’s me. I talked with Ms. Johnson and I helped her realize that this is a misunderstanding. You can come back to Pink Station now.”

“Athet,” he replies. “You know I can’t.”

“Please, Richua. This is just a misunderstanding, right?”

“No, it’s not. I know what’s going on. We are slaughtering billions of sentient life here.”

“Richua, just stop for a second and think about all the lives we saved.” So it is true. All of it. “Millions of people, and potentially billions more will be saved in the future. Families, loved ones. Your parents. When you consider all this, don’t you think it was worth it?”

Their genocide is your burden.

“No, Athet. No, it wasn’t worth it. We are committing genocide on a cosmic scale.”

“Richua, we’re almost done with the mining. Eventually, we won’t need any more of it. What we are doing here will save everyone.”

“I don’t buy that anymore, Athet.”

Richua disconnects communications with Pink Station.

“They will fire,” the creature thinks.

“Give me a sec,” he thinks.

On the starmap, Richua finds a mining station a light minute away, and sets the vessel's trajectory to the station's location.

Behind them, a bright orange light emerges from Pink Station's location. Could it be—

Beam weapons.

They're already in the proximity of the mining station, but it's going to be close. Just a few more seconds. He requests auto-permission to land on the mining station.

Denied. Of course.

Closing in on the mining station, he knows there's only one way inside.

Richua grabs his puppet's body, who is now returning to consciousness with the mind of the creature, and turns on the magnetic belts to brace for impact.

Their vessel's AI rapidly decelerates to minimize damage but—

The vessel crashes straight through the mining station's hull and skids dozens of meters inside, bouncing and hurtling and rolling through a sea of machinery. As the vessel decelerates to a gentle floating speed, Richua peers out of the window. Reversium has already been deployed to repair the hull damage, and the air is no longer being sucked out of the station.

“Come on,” he speaks to the creature for the first time. “Let's get out.”

As he tries to move, he feels an intense pain in his abdomens. He looks down and finds a shaft penetrating his guts.

“Oh, no.”

“What is it?” The creature asks but quickly notices the wound.

The creature grabs him by the waist and pulls him off the shaft.

Once out, Richua tears his shirt and wraps it around himself as a gauze. The off-white shirt soaks blood instantly, and turns dark red.

Their genocide is your burden.

The silhouette reappears, this time more vivid. It's his mother.

I should have died. Why did you let them die for me?

The puppet helps him out of the pod and floats him towards the floor, where it turns on their magnetic boots to avoid floating off. It lays him on his side, and examines his wound. He finds a glass shard next to him, and puts it in his pocket.

“Is it bad?” Richua asks jokingly.

“Yes,” the creature says in a grim tone, obviously unfamiliar with the subtleties of human sarcasm.

“Look,” he says. “There's a pod bay near us.” He points at a

sign reading POD BAY. “Let’s go there.”

The creature drags Richua’s body towards the bay, leaving a thick trail of blood behind them. The doors open, and they find one available pod inside.

The puppet stands and scans the room. It plods to a wall—struggling with its unnatural body—and opens a cabinet, retrieving some of its contents.

“There are medical supplies here.”

“What are they?”

The puppet hands him a syringe labeled REVERSIUM – MEDICAL. Richua blinks away drops of blood and sweat obscuring his vision as he considers his option.

“It’s okay,” the puppet says. “You should use it.”

The creature waits for a reply but Richua holds the syringe in silence. The image of his own face looking at him, trying to convince him to use the reversium medicine reminds him of his former self.

For a moment, he expects the haunting image of his mother to reappear, but it doesn’t. It’s just him now. He needs to make his decision.

He throws the syringe at a wall. A crash, and the sound of fluids leaking.

“Why?” The creature exclaims. “Why did you do that?”

“I can’t. Not anymore.”

“Then how?” The puppet looks at Richua’s severe wound.

There’s already numbness in his legs, probably paralysis due to extensive spinal damage.

“What’s your name?” he asks. “I never got your name.”

Surprised, the creature responds, “My community named me Zephar, which translates to Sun in your language.”

“That’s beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

“Can . . . can you tell me more about your previous life?”

“I was the architect of my community. I designed our homes in the reefs, near the surface of the ocean, so we could worship our star—Zephar. The gatherings were symbolic for most of us, actually. The purpose was to bring our community together.”

He tries to picture the scene, and realizes something. “Zephar,” he says. “I believe you. You are sentient.”

Distant sounds emerge from within the station.

Zephar stands and opens the single pod’s door.

“Richua, I think it’s time to go.”

It drags him near the pod’s entrance, and steps inside the craft. Without warning, Richua latches himself onto a rail on the floor, preventing Zephar from lifting him into the vehicle.

“No, go without me,” he says. “I know this sounds ridiculous, but if I go with you, they’ll keep searching for me. The files will never reach Terra.”

“What? No, we can escape together!”

“We can’t. Their ships are too fast. If I die here, they will stop looking. You’ll be free then.”

“But won’t they simply save you with reversium?”

“I just changed my death setting. I no longer allow saving my body with reversium. The message is being delivered UNH now, so they’ll know soon. They will come for my body once I’m dead.”

“Couldn’t this body,” Zephar looks down at itself, Richua’s puppet, “Couldn’t it carry both our minds?”

“I don’t think so. Your consciousness was restructured for mobility between bodies. Mine won’t be as quick without a proper linking machine . . . it’ll need time. Time we don’t have.”

“But . . . isn’t there another way?”

“No. You must go—Now. They’ll arrive any second.”

Zephar waits in silence for a few seconds, and nods.

“Richua, thank you for everything. I will not forget you.”

Voices come from beyond the pod bay’s entrance. They’re already here. Sapphire. Here to clean their mess. The creature enters the pod and closes the door. Richua can see his own eyes staring back at him through the pod’s window.

The pod launches just as the doors behind him open and sounds of heavy footsteps swarm the air. He grabs the glass shard he had saved from the crash earlier and squeezes it tight in his right hand. He closes his eyes, without fear of what’s to come—without doubt that it feels right—and stabs his jugular.

He pulls the shard out.

Blood gushes out like a torrent of lost souls. He watches crimson streams spiraling out of him in zero-g. In his last moments, he feels both retribution and forgiveness, for the millions who died because of his cause.

His face feels numb as he senses the warmth of his blood drowning his cold body. His augmented body is failing to preserve life, despite its sophisticated defense mechanisms. And just as his vision dies, he sees murky faces near him, pounding him, attempting to save him with rhythmic, mechanical pumping, but to no avail.

Zephar, he thinks. The name of a star long gone. He tries to imagine what it looked like . . . what type of star it was . . . a red giant? . . . a white dwarf? . . . Whatever it was, he knows its name will endure for at least a while longer . . .

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anil Erol is a PhD student in mechanical engineering at Penn State. He is the President of PSI-FI, and the Editor-in-Chief of The Jump Point. When he isn't busy with research, he tries to spend as much time as he can on anything related to sci-fi. His favorite sci-fi topics are artificial intelligence, transhumanism, and consciousness—so it's only natural that he adores cyberpunk.

SIMULATING A HUMAN BRAIN

Let's talk about the human brain. A typical human brain runs on the order of exaFLOPS. That's 10^{18} (one billion billion) operations per second! Quite an evolutionary achievement, huh? So if we were to simulate it, we'd need to build processors that could run at similar or faster speeds. The average processor today operates at teraFLOPS, (10^{12} operations/sec), but the most powerful supercomputers are much faster, some reaching almost 100 petaFLOPS (10^{17} operations per second!). That's not bad! And, based on Moore's law, which claims that processing powers will double every two years, we should be in the exaFLOPS range in the next five to ten years. Exciting, right?

Unfortunately, there are two significant problems we are facing. First of all, Moore's "law" may not survive much longer. As transistors are shrinking, they are approaching a theoretical limit. Today's mainstream processors use 14 nanometer (nm) architectures, which we expect to reduce to 7 nm in the next decade. However, we could only go so small before reaching the size of a single atom, which is somewhere between 0.1 and 0.5 nanometers. So eventually, we will hit a roadblock, and we will need breakthroughs like quantum or DNA computing to achieve higher processing at smaller scales.

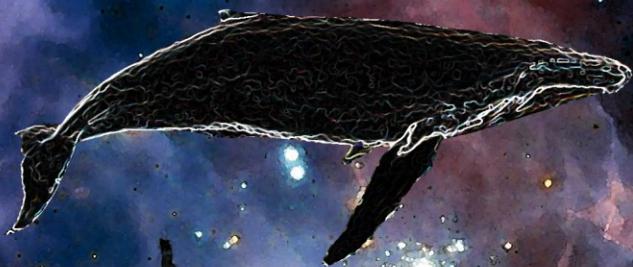
The second problem is that the human brain is probably not as simple as 10^{18} operations per second. There is a web of connections in the human brain, which we barely understand right now. Mapping it could take decades or even centuries.

Luckily though, we could overcome these challenges with the help of computers. Tools like machine learning are advancing at a rapid rate, and could potentially solve most of our problems for us. Perhaps, then, one might wonder if our brains would be obsolete by then.

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Whale Watching

Layne Radlauer

It's a long way to Zylerg VII. It takes about two years, seventh months, and two weeks to get there, and most of that is in hyperspace. It's an exceedingly dull ride, as one can imagine, and the destination – a backwater colony on the edge of Government Space – didn't activate my excitement receptors, if you know what I mean. Once I made it, there wasn't a whole lot of fun to be had, considering it's a hot, scalding, sandy rock with scarcely a drop to drink. However, the money from the shipment was good, with enough up front to permit me to invest in a state-of-the-art hibernation pod. I figured that hey, it's basically free money, so why not?

I left the orbiting port from Vega and headed for the jump point. My ship was a big, blue box with a small window up front. Like most freighter ships, it lacked the bells and whistles of the fancier boats. It was unadorned, with the exception of "Big Blue Whale" written in yellow letters on the non-loading side. It had a cheap anti-debris laser on the top just in case; I probably should have spent the extra credits on something more effective, but I was cheap. Hindsight is 20/20.

After putting in the coordinates and charting the route, I ate my final meal before heading into the pod. Hot peppers and beef, with a tall glass of orange juice. I watched the news on the holoscreen while I ate, thinking about how much money I was about to make. I was hauling a load of mechanical colonists, designed to ensure the survival of their fleshy human counterparts. They colonists need them desperately – Zylerg VII is a bit less livable than they initially believed – and I was in the right place at the right time. Lucky me.

I set up my EZ-ZZ hibernation pod. The best spot for it was in the head cabin, right next to the starmap console and the bathroom. Thanks to the setup androids, I didn't have to do much more than plug it in. The instruction manual was pretty straightforward: take a pill, lay down, stick on the REM inhibitors to prevent being aware of the situation, and pull the door down. The hibernation pod had a self-contained life support unit, which purified recycled air, and the pill provided me with enough nutrition to last for several years. It also came with some DNA autorepair nanobots, which kept my natural functions (including aging) in stasis.

I activated the ship's autopilot, took the pill, laid down, stuck

the REM inhibitors on my forehead, and pulled the door down. My eyelids grew heavy. The moment my eyelids touched my cheek, the world faded to black. Before I fell asleep, I heard a faint clunk and a subtle vibration.

I woke up on Gerglog B, in my old apartment. My studio apartment was filthy. The floor was covered in old simpack wrappers and food paste cannisters. In the corner of the room, my headset and its associated connection pole. My headset was my only friend at the time; after a long stint without work, I used the damn thing so much I became addicted. Going back to this place was something of a nightmare. Of course, it being a dream, I didn't realize where I was.

The door opened, and my mother entered. I stumbled off my cot and walked to the toilet. My apartment was just one squalid room with all the amenities of an actual apartment, toilet included. I sat on the toilet, when my mother started to speak.

"You don't know nothing 'bout birthin' no babies!" she yelled, furious.

"I don't. You're right."

"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

"Alright, I guess."

"You should be kissed, by someone who knows how."

She then morphed into a horrid mass of writhing blue tentacles. They all reached at me, seized my limbs tightly, and pulled my screaming body through the door. I felt myself engulfed in the mass, and a shade of darkness consumed me.

I heard an abrupt, crashing sound in the hibernation chamber, and suddenly realized the grim reality of my situation. Something had gone wrong; the REM inhibitors must've malfunctioned. Yet, I wasn't quite able to wake up. Whatever happens, I'm stuck here, I realized.

This must be either hell, or my boarding school, I thought. Unfortunately, it was my boarding school on Galileo VII. In the distance, I saw the faint outline of Borblax's School for Boys – a brutalist concrete box with a neon red sign. I looked at my watch – apparently, I had a watch – and realized I was late. In a frenzy, I hopped off the boulder, narrowly avoiding the hot stream of lava flowing by. The monsters picked up my scent, and rushed towards me. I ran as fast as I could, hopping over bits of stone and lava pools. One creature, a spider with dental tools for legs and my father's head for a body, came at me.

I ducked under the spider dad's pointed syringe thrust and high tailed it. I had an exam that day; if I was late, I would be due for some 21st century punishment. An immense ditch filled with teeth obstructed my escape. I looked back, and upon seeing the

monster's terrible advance, decided to jump despite the insurmountable gap. I came up short, but still managed to grip the edge of the cliff and pull myself up. As I continued to run, I heard an awful drilling sound and looked back. In life, my father was an artisan old-school dentist, tinkering with the teeth of people afraid of robots drilling into their jaws. In my dream, he was a spider, now removing the cavities of innumerable teeth.

Eventually, I managed to reach the steps of the tall, oppressive building. I walked up the steep, difficult steps. At the top, the headmaster was waiting for me. He was a devil of a man: a lanky, black-mustached fellow with thin circular glasses. The headmaster tapped his foot, pointing at his watch.

He scolded me for being late, getting red in the face. I explained to him the situation, that I was being chased by my spider dad. That's not an excuse, he said, and he told me I failed. I was doomed to repeat the grade, stuck here in this hellhole for another year. I went up to my room to cry, which was located in that very same building. I opened the front door, and found myself in a completely different scenario.

My anxieties about my test fled, as I found myself on a sandy island. It was barren, with the exception of a few tufts of gray grass. Surrounding the island was a vast green sea, placid and still. Tall and tan stone monoliths jutted out from the water. Some were close, some were far, but they were all the more-or-less the same in appearance. They reminded me of the mysterious bones they found on Barnard XII. On Barnard XIII, they found white structures just like these, but they were all part of one big, nameless organism. These weren't so orderly.

All in all, the whole effect was pretty peaceful, albeit bizarre. I finally had a few moments to breath and figure out what's going on. Clearly, I thought, something had gone wrong with the REM inhibitors. One's perception of time is all out of whack when they're dreaming – who knows how long I'd be here. That pill contained a whole mess of strange chemicals I didn't quite understand, although I'm pretty sure it's kept me confined to my dreamscape.

So, I could only discern three options. One, I could keep dreaming and see how far the rabbit hole goes. My subconscious might teach me a life-changing lesson. Maybe, eventually, I would wake up in my ship orbiting Zylerg VII. Two, I could sit here and wait, see if I could take a nap on the beach. Then again, would I dream another dream? A dream within a dream sounded like a terrible idea. Or three, I could try to will myself awake, if that was possible.

The sea began to shake. The waters became a whole lot

more tumultuous, sending high waves crashing on the island. In the near distance, the water began to part. The head of a great blue whale breached the sea – an ancient, extinct species of big mammals from Old Earth. The cold, small eyes of the leviathan leered at me.

As a child, my mother read me a book. She was a traditionalist, never believing that a holobook was a good way to nurture a youthful mind; so, she read me paper books. The book I loved the most was *The Story of the Star Whales*. The book was based on an old belief of whales that swam in the darkness of space, drinking the energy of stars for sustenance.

This, I believe, was a star whale. I could tell by the glittering, glowing, golden star on its forehead. On the shore, the water began to part, revealing a yellow stone staircase. It was just enough for me to fit through. I walked down the staircase into a tunnel of emerald waves. A swarm of strange fish fluttered around me, with multiple heads and pink scales.

The staircase led to a door down below. I felt hesitant to continue, as I knew that I would leave the dream by opening the door. Still, I descended the staircase, all the while marveling at this tunnel beneath the waves. The door was simple and wooden, with a circular brass handle. As I turned the doorknob, I looked around one more time, feeling as though I was leaving something behind. I entered the door.

It was at a restaurant on Taos III, the meeting spot between my ex-wife and I during the later days of our relationship. She was sitting at one of the booths, and I joined her on the other side. I said hello, and a robotic waiter came up to the table. It told us the specials, and poured water in our glasses.

We had some small talk and looked at the holomenu drifting above the table. Pasta, steak, salads, and foothy-feet floated in the air. I chose the spaghetti and meatballs, and she picked the foothy-feet. Our waiter kindly left.

She told me that she had the bowling balls, and didn't want to give them back. I told her that I had the ultradomesticated housecat, and that she'd never see him again. She got red in the face and promised me a slow and painful death. I thought of something to say, but the waiter came with our food. The robot placed the spaghetti in front of me. It didn't really look like spaghetti and meatballs, more so a pile of disembodied human noses. Her meal was just fine though. The foothy-feet was well-mannered, and didn't even try to walk off the plate. She sliced off one of the thirty-seven toes with a sharp knife, took a bite, and looked at me fiercely.

She leaned forward, kissed my forehead, and ceased to be.

The restaurant simply ended, and crumbled into dust, leaving me sitting on a chair in an abyss of white. The chair vanished, too, and I fell on my posterior on an undefinable surface. There was, like always, a door. It was made of glass, with an iron bar with the word “push” etched on the front.

Cruel memories visited me, filled the abyss with pictures. Floating sex in zero-g on the Station of Love. Tickle fights on the vermilion grass of Capricorn II. Rides on the six-legged wolves on Disney Star’s Magic Empire.

I pushed open the door, eager to leave that horrid place. Too many memories. This time, I found myself in the hibernation pod. I opened the hatch via emergency bar and wearily stepped out. I lost my balance, but managed to lean against the wall. A loud, screeching alarm met my eardrums, disorienting me further.

I managed to gather my wits and sat down in front of the console. Apparently, I had reached the jump point. I asked the ship for diagnostics, and its electronic voice informed me that an asteroid had hit my ship and disabled some of the auxiliary systems, including the hibernation pod. Damned cheap anti-debris laser. In addition to my terrible cheap anti-debris laser malfunctioning, those damned setup bots had set it up in auxiliary power, when it probably should be in life support. The ship automatically stopped itself at one of the jump points, assuming that the pilot would command the ship to one of the nearby mech satellites. I told my ship to shut up, and it obeyed.

I took manual control of the Big Blue Whale and flew it over to a nearby stellar mechanic. I parked my ship on one of the arms, ate a snack, made some coffee, and gave my details to the mechanic. The mechanic’s voice had a gruff voice, harsh and deep. It sounded . . . familiar.

I pushed the button to open the airlock door. My brother walked in – Henry, bald, short, and stocky. He told me that I had a problem with my rotator, whatever that is, and that I was welcome to join the family. He told me that they were waiting outside. Then, like my mother before him, his face morphed into a mass of blue tentacles. They grabbed my legs and arms, pulling me through the door and into . . .

The hibernation pod. This time, there was no alarm. I opened the hatch and stepped out. I looked outside the window, seeing only stars. Using the diagnostic information on the ship, I found that an asteroid had indeed hit my ship. My cheap, awful laser had failed to disintegrate it.

I did not make it to the jump point. My ship had kept moving at less-than-lightspeed until it had run out of fuel. Now, I am stuck in space, and had been stuck for two years, seventh

The Jump Point

months, and two weeks. Now, without fuel, I have little chance of returning to an inhabited sector. At least not within a normal, human lifespan.

I have no choice but to take this pill again, to enter the hibernation pod until the nutrition runs out, dreaming endless dreams until my ship returns to whatever remains of mankind. I leave behind this catalog of dreams, to let my future self or those that find my coffin know who I was.

When you need an anti-debris laser, invest in the best. Choose Antistroid.®

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Layne Radlauer is a fresh alumnus with a BA in English, and hails from New Orleans, LA. He is also the director of fiction for the magazine, and fancies himself a freelance editor/writer. His favorite books are “A Scanner Darkly,” “Dune,” “Hyperion,” and “Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince.

DO AUENS EXIST? Pt 2

If you remember, we talked about the Fermi paradox on page 34. Now we will discuss possible explanations for it.

One scary possibility is that there is a “great filter,” which eliminates civilizations with such precision that no single civilization has been able to survive it. Examples of filters include nuclear warfare and catastrophic climate change.

Another terrifying explanation is that instead of civilizations destroying themselves, they are systematically targeted by a far more advanced species. Such a species would deploy a von Neumann probe, which is a machine capable of replicating itself, in all directions from the predatory species’ planet. At the speed of light, the device(s) would expand like a balloon, eventually swallowing an entire galaxy.

One other possibility is that we are simply alone. However, there are hundreds of other hypotheses that we haven’t discussed. Join our facebook page if you have some: www.facebook.com/groups/psifipsu





The Haunting of Theresa

Katelyn Robbins

Theresa stood on the outskirts of a group arranged around a stone-pitted fire. One of the half dozen college aged campers made gestures with his hands as he told what appeared to be an elaborate tale. “. . . old man . . . chopped off . . . little girls . . . hulking . . . spirit . . .” Theresa heard these snippets of the storyteller’s speech, but she was too far, and his voice too low, to piece them together. One girl jumped at the faint hoot of an owl. Or perhaps there had been a particularly frightening turn in the tale that had coincided with the animal’s call. The silhouette of another male member of the group slunk behind the array of primary colored folding chairs and grabbed the shoulders of a different female figure, a scheme presumably planned between the attacker and the storyteller ahead of time. Her short screech ripped through the clear, starry night. The others burst into laughter at the successful scare. Even the frightened girl eventually joined in, long hair brushing the dirt and gravel as she bent over, doubled up in giggles. Theresa waited for the group to sober, afraid any lingering merriment would ruin her chances.

Sometime later, the fire had burnt out to a pile of glowing embers and a single log. Occasionally a flickering flame would dance to life, but it was only a matter of minutes before the centerpiece died completely and its observers turned in for the night. Grasping her one slim opportunity, Theresa glided out from behind a slender oak tree and made a soundless journey to the enclosed ring of people. The group continued to talk amongst one another softly during her approach. No one lifted their gaze, no one greeted her, no one had noticed.

Theresa positioned herself just behind the storyteller. With an unnecessary deep breath, she placed her hands on his shoulders. He did not move. He continued to speak, his tone unchanged. He had not noticed.

She moved on to the next one, the storyteller’s accomplice. She attacked this boy’s shoulders with a quick, hard grip, just as he had done to scare the girl earlier. He lifted one hand and gently brushed the opposite shoulder, as if swatting away a bug. Theresa, though used to this reaction, felt the corners of her lips turn downwards. She clamped her fingers harder and tried to shake him. He remained resolutely in place.

She made her way around the circle, achieving equally dissatisfying results from each camper. Her scowl subsided slightly

when she reached the target of the prank, hopeful the girl was still on edge, but she seemed to have bounced back as Theresa's touch made no effect. She elicited a small shiver from the girl who'd jumped at the owl's hoot, but the girl's face remained placid, clearly attributing Theresa's presence to a chill. Theresa's fingers fluttered down off the girl's shoulder.

She began the process anew inside the circle. She grabbed their hands, touched their faces, even perched herself on some of their laps. The results were the same; a shiver here, a scratch of the contacted region there, but no real acknowledgement of her presence. This circuit was the more emotionally straining of the two. After each attempt at contact, she could now look at their eyes. Despite the knowledge that no one had ever seen her before, her hopes rose each and every time that this new person would see her. These hopes never failed to plummet as her gaze would inevitably met a pair of eyes focused on something besides her. When she completed this circuit with the same results as ever, she pivoted on her heels, but made no footprints. Even the dirt didn't concede to let her make an impression on it. She accepted defeat for today.

Sitting beneath the tree she'd lurked behind, knees drawn to her chest and arms wrapped around her legs, Theresa gazed at the others. Their silhouettes grew fainter as the fire died. "Who's to say they're alive?" she pondered casually to herself, "Maybe I am the living one in a world of ghosts." She snorted at the very idea. She knew she was dead, no doubt about it. This meant her options for communication were extremely limited. Most of the living obstinately refused to acknowledge her. Even when they did react, none were aware enough to see her, let alone hold a conversation. And other ghosts were rarer than Theresa would have thought pre-death. So, Theresa talked to herself.

She drew her attention back to the group, which had shrunk to just the victim of the scare and her assailant. Their figures were only visible by the faint glow of a few embers. Theresa watched the dark figures exchange a friendly good night hug. And then a kiss.

Theresa felt a fire burst within her at the unwelcome display. Shooting to her feet, she leapt at the couple. She pushed her palms against the boy's chest, attempting to knock him away. Her hands traveled through him. She pulled the girl by her arms, trying to break the embrace. Theresa fell back but the girl remained standing. Her fury grew as the couple remained intertwined, oblivious to her efforts. She stomped on their feet. She yanked the girl's hair. It fluttered, but this inconsequential movement went unnoticed by the preoccupied lovers. "Even if you saw it, you'd say it was the wind!" she spat out. In confirmation of Theresa's

unheard proclamation, the girl said, "It's getting cold, I think the breeze is starting to pick up," and rubbed her arms.

"Yeah its getting late," the boy responded, stifling a yawn with his hand.

They went their separate ways. Theresa felt a weight slowly lift from its previous position of suffocating her heart, felt the fiery heat steadily evaporate, though these sensations would take their time to completely absolve her anger. She still seethed with clenched teeth where the couple had just stood entwined.

"I love you," the boy said as he ducked into his tent.

Theresa yanked at her own hair now, wishing to cover her ears, trying, however futilely, to keep these or any other endearments from assaulting her. She had no way to combat this form of affection (feeble as her previous attempts might have been). She could not push the words back into his mouth, could not catch them before they reached the girl's ears.

"I love you too," the girl said back, giving her love one last smile before crawling into her tent.

Unable to destroy their words, Theresa tore off into the trees. She let off a shriek, not bothering to form words of her own. No one would hear them even if she did. Theresa wove between tree trunks, kicking and stomping the leaves underfoot. They made only the faintest of rustling noises, and not one crunched beneath the soles of her shoes. Frustration overwhelmed her; she had no release. Her memories consumed her . . .

. . . She was romping through the woods, this very same forest. When she kicked the leaves, they flew, then floated back down in a shower of red and gold. When she stepped on the dry, brown ones they crumbled with a satisfying crunch. And instead of the sky resembling a black abyss holding countless, small, unreachable diamonds, it was a field of blue sprinkled with cotton ball looking clouds. The sun dappled her face through the canopy of branches, warming her in patches. She closed her eyes with the poetic idea of feeling nature.

"What are you thinking about, Theresa? Where have you gone?" a man's voice asked. It was warm, just like the sun, smooth like honey. She hated it.

But apparently Theresa of the past felt just as kindly towards him as she did towards nature in this moment. "Just thinking about how happy I am to be here, to experience this," Theresa heard herself saying. She felt her lips curving up at the corners involuntarily (at least for the dead Theresa). Her eyelids languidly lifted themselves and her brown eyes beheld a man who Theresa had believed to be perfect. Sure, some of his teeth were a little crooked giving him a wonky smile, he wasn't particularly

muscular, and his hair stuck up in a peculiar way at the back of his head. But Theresa hadn't seen any of these as flaws. To her they only enhanced him, added to the charm of his eyes that matched the blue of the sky, his dark hair just a shade lighter than her own, and, of course, his hypnotic voice. "And I haven't gone anywhere," Theresa continued, answering the second of his two inquiries, "Why would I when that'd mean leaving you?"

The Theresa reliving her memories wanted to warn her past self against her own stupidity, wanted to hit the boy she'd so ignorantly trusted, wanted to pull herself away from him and run, never looking back.

But instead she had to watch as he intertwined his long fingers with her delicate ones. They walked under a canopy of leaves, the sun that shone through dappling them with patches of light and shadow. He teased her and she giggled, her laughter high pitched and airy.

Theresa had to watch as he led her to a blue and purple checkered blanket with a basket he'd prepared in a clearing. She sat cross legged on the blanket and nibbled on a turkey and cucumber sandwich Dean had prepared for her. She tore up a piece of grass and tried to make a kazoo noise by blowing on it, but all she got was some spittle on her thumbs. Dean flicked ants off the blanket as they scuttled towards her.

A small creek ran through the far end of the clearing. Dean held out a hand to help Theresa up. They took the crusts from their sandwiches and threw them into the water, which glittered from the direct, afternoon sunlight. Each piece floated, saturated, and threatened to go under, before a duck swam up, dunked its beak, and emerged with the leftover bread. Theresa felt herself smile, her heart warmed at the notion she was helping someone, even if just a duck.

Then Theresa had to watch as Dean got down on one knee. Had to divert her eyes from the feasting water fowl. Noticed the square, velvet box with a ring nestled inside. Felt her heart plummet and constrict. Was forced to listen to herself shriek through tears, "Yes, Dean, yes!" as she internally screamed *No, Theresa, no!*

Night after night Theresa frequented this clearing. Maybe she could get away, maybe she could visit somewhere else, but she doubted it, and besides, she never tried. The only recollections she ever had took place here. This was where Dean took her on dates. This was where he'd proposed, as she'd just relived. And this was where he'd broken her. At the moment, she couldn't recall what he'd done, but that was inconsequential. She only knew that

whenever she thought of him her yelling filled the woods (though no one heard), and tears fell from her face to the grass (which remained dry); she threw her fists at the trees and people (who went on as if she did not exist). These reactions were proof enough to her that her hatred was justified. How else could she feel so strongly without knowing why?

And so, night after night, Theresa watched those who camped out in her clearing. She tried to interact with the world, tried to get someone to notice her. Eventually she would give up and wait for a different evening, sometimes with new people, sometimes with no one.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been at this task. It would have been easy enough to count the years with the passing seasons, but even the events that occurred posthumous were difficult for her to remember. The only memories solid and tangible in her mind were her engagement and the dates with Dean leading up to it that she was forced to live over and over. In any case, she couldn't imagine it had been very long; the campers wore clothes similar to those she and Dean wore in the memories; t-shirts, sweaters, button-down flannels, shorts, sweatpants, jeans, sneakers.

She wasn't sure why she did it either. She was fully aware acknowledgement by someone living would not bring her back. She supposed pure boredom kept her at it; after all what else could she spend eternity doing?

Several days passed before new campers came. She watched them from behind a tree, as always. Though it served no purpose to hide, Theresa did so without thinking. She had to assume it was a natural instinct from being human, a piece of her DNA (if she even had such a thing anymore) that stayed even though she was no longer living.

The two inhabitants of her clearing began assembling their sleeping quarters. Theresa had never witnessed this process before; the campsites were always assembled before she awoke after sunset. The guy held the instructions, turning them upside-down then right-side up again, flipping between the two sides. He was further challenged by the necessity of holding a flashlight. The girl, meanwhile, began putting pieces together without any guidance. Eventually, she got the poles in the correct configuration. The boy laughed, setting the unused instructions aside, then hugged her briefly before the two moved on to their next project of making a fire.

"They could be siblings," Theresa muttered to herself, "Or simply friends." Theresa had been sure the two were going to kiss, that she would fruitlessly try to push them apart, and that she

would be plunged into one of the dreaded memories. But they hadn't; she was safe for now.

Theresa watched and waited for her opportunity, as she did every night someone stayed in her clearing. Though she could not really tell the time, it felt like ages had passed since they began setting up the tent. Truck finally unloaded of an unnecessary amount of camping gear (an assortment of pots and pans, half a dozen lawn games, and three bins yet to be opened), they sat around a pitiful, but functioning, fire. The two talked animatedly while Theresa planned how to approach the necessary routine once their conversation died down. However, the discussion stopped abruptly as they embraced and began to kiss, the dreaded event that would trigger Theresa's plunge into memory. Before she could begin her compulsory ritual though, a stray flicker from the fire lit up a diamond adorning the girl's left ring finger. Unable to react and without time to do so, Theresa was pulled away . . .

. . . She was still in the woods, these woods, but there was daylight. An early rising owl hooted; the sun was just beginning to set. The day-time star low in the sky cast a slanted, orangey light on the forest, leaving some parts in shadow, bathing others in an increasingly dim glow. She could feel herself almost skipping across the forest floor. She was alone. *I've never been here before*, the dead Theresa thought, which was obviously not true, and she knew this. Yet, in none of the memories she'd experienced was she alone. Theresa's left hand raised without her control, her eyes fixing it in her view. On the finger next to her pinkie sat a silver banded diamond engagement ring. She heard herself squeal "I'm getting married!" Dead Theresa's heart sank as the living Theresa traveled down her well-worn path, soul light as a feather. She could not remember why she was there without Dean, could not remember what happened next, but she was certain it had not ended well.

Theresa reached the end of the trail just before she could see the clearing. Her giddy self positioned her body behind a tree (*her tree*, dead Theresa realized), and then poked her head out to the right. She wanted to take in the beauty of her favorite place. Wanted to lay in the lush, tall, flower-infested grass and soak up the memories. Wanted to greet the creek and its duck inhabitants, the only witnesses to her commitment. Wanted to recapture in imagination the happiest moment of her life.

Instead she viewed two forms (the first of many to come) lounging on the grass, lips locked and undressing one another. Heat rising to her cheeks, Theresa turned as quietly as possible so the couple wouldn't realize she'd intruded on their romantic interlude. Before she'd made it a complete 180 degrees, her eyes

snagged something out of her peripherals that made her take a second glance. Vision clouded by her initial shock and embarrassment, Theresa hadn't noticed the blue and purple checkered picnic blanket.

The blanket Dean had proposed to her on.

A blanket Dean now shared with a woman in the most intimate sense.

Another woman. A blonde woman. A woman who wasn't her. Though redundant, it took Theresa this many ways of looking at the situation to grasp its reality. Her legs went out beneath her. She fell to her knees, strands of hair hanging in her face, obscuring the scene, but not negating its reality. Choking sobs built up in her chest; in her throat. Hot tears coursed down her cheeks, off her chin, and finished their journey by watering the grass. She could taste the salt from deviant drops that took a path over her lips. Her heart felt as though it crashed to the pit of her stomach, then shattered as it made impact. At last, the living and dead Therasas were on the same page.

Theresa didn't hear anything beyond her own heartbroken sobs, nor did she consider how her loud display might be heard by anyone else. When he was just a few yards away, Theresa registered Dean, now fully clothed, rushing toward her. His face was pale and his blue eyes unusually wide. His naturally unruly hair was messier than normal, and for good reason.

Theresa clambered to her feet, using the tree (her tree) for support. The bark bit into the soft skin on her palms, but she took no notice. This negligible pain was completely numbed by the hurt she felt inside. The wound tore deeper and deeper each time she blinked and opened her eyes. It was as if a layer of the Dean she'd said she'd marry dissolved with each flutter of her eyelids. Each time the eyelids popped open he transformed more completely into a monster she'd been too blind to notice before.

"Theresa, it's not—"

"—what it looks like?" she barked out the ending of the clichéd phrase, followed by a hallow laugh. She pivoted and extended a leg to run, hoping her weak knees would carry her. Before she could try, Dean had latched his hands to her shoulders and swung her back around to face him. She let her curtains of dark hair obscure her face as she bent her neck, unwilling to give Dean the dignity of making eye contact.

"Theresa I . . . It's not . . . I didn't . . . I can explain . . . I—"

Theresa wanted to say something biting and witty, something to make him hurt like she was hurting, but in her confused, devastated, horrified state nothing came. She yanked herself free of his clutching fingers and stumbled back a few steps until her

shoulder blades pressed up against a tree. She pulled the engagement ring up over the knuckle of her ring finger, and threw it into the clearing.

Plodding through the leaves and tears clouding her vision, Theresa wove her way through a line of trees and emerged on a winding gravel road. She never saw the truck that hit her . . .

The orange sky with pink clouds shifted to the dark, starry one Theresa was most accustomed to. She was returned to the clearing, Dean and the blanket fading away as the couple who'd thrown her into the vision reappeared. "I love you Iris," the male figure said softly, but just loud enough that Theresa could hear.

"I love you too Chris," the girl, Iris, responded. They exchanged a last kiss before the boy told Iris he was going to head in for the night. "I'll be over in a second," Iris said, giving him an adoring smile, then returning her gaze to the fire, still with that contented grin.

Silent tears continuing to stream down her face, Theresa yelled in the direction of Iris, "Don't you see stupid girl, he's going to ruin you!" She let out an anguished sob for pity of her own situation, but also Iris's, convinced there was a parallel between their life stories. Eyes clouded with tears, she did not notice Iris's delft blue ones, wide as saucers, staring slightly past Theresa, though in her general direction.

Theresa continued to moan and mutter. "All men are the same . . . He'll tear you apart . . . Nothing good can come . . . Love should be a sin . . ."

"Hello?" Iris whispered, barely parting her lips.

For several minutes, Theresa said nothing, her own shock matching Iris's. *How can she hear me?* Theresa asked herself, afraid to talk to the girl just yet, afraid it wasn't real, afraid that the moment she opened her mouth Iris would no longer acknowledge her existence. The light of a flame lit Iris's ring again, drawing Theresa's attention to the glimmering diamond. *Of course*, she thought, *This is my purpose. I can save her.* And so, for the first time since she'd been dead, Theresa talked to another.

"Hello Iris," Theresa eventually responded, her voice still clogged from the tears, but more focused and assured. Iris visibly jumped in her seat, then sat so still she might have been a statue. The only parts of her moving were her eyes, which frantically searched the tree line. "Don't be afraid, dear girl," Theresa said softly, trying to take on a motherly tone, but Iris only became stiffer. The muscles in her shoulders tightened as she drew them closer to her ears, as if she were preparing to curl into a ball. "He can only hurt you," Theresa said more frantically, wanting the girl to stay, "but I never will." She believed what she said.

Iris scrambled up from her seat, took the long way around the fire to stay as far from Theresa's voice as possible, then practically dove into the tent, zipping it the whole way shut behind her. Theresa let out a long sigh. The best she could hope for was that the girl would still be here tomorrow. However, as she believed her destiny was to save this girl from her fate, Theresa didn't doubt Iris would be sticking around long enough for Theresa to complete her mission.

A few hours later, unhindered by the zipped-shut flap, Theresa glided into the tent. Iris shuddered as Theresa's hand accidentally brushed the sleeping girl's leg. But Theresa was not here for Iris. Instead, she sat cross legged watching the fiancé's phone. Hours passed and eventually the screen lit up. To Theresa's delight, the message that had appeared was headed by a woman's name. The sun rose and Theresa began to disappear, but not before she had memorized the name.

The next evening, Theresa waited by her tree as Iris and the fiancé, Chris, talked, laughed, and kissed. This last action and other shows of affection were no longer sending Theresa into her memories, perhaps because she had found a purpose.

Iris seemed back to normal after her panic of the night before. Though she had not found the source of the voice, she explained it away. She had probably just been sleep deprived the previous evening and, amongst this spooky woodsy location, imagined it all. She had briefly entertained the idea that someone actually had been there, but that was crazy, they couldn't have known her name. And even if someone was out there the night before, they were certainly gone by now . . .

Theresa waited until Chris got up to use the restroom. She didn't want to talk in front of him in case he could hear her too. "Listen to me." Iris's back stiffened once again. "You must leave him."

"Wh—where . . . ?" Iris began a question. She stopped before its end, either feeling she was being silly or scared she would get an answer.

"Where am I?" Theresa asked for her. "I'm right next to you."

Iris's eyes darted frantically as they had the previous night. She scanned the trees. However, she only moved her head, as if fearing moving her body would alert the elusive person of her whereabouts.

"You won't be able to see me Iris," Theresa said to stop the girl's agitated motion. "I'm a spirit . . . guide." Theresa tacked on the last word hurriedly. She did not want the girl to fear her. Telling Iris she was a ghost seemed like a good way to scare her.

Appointing herself as a ethereal “guide” would hopefully amend this slip in her judgement.

“I, wha-,” Iris began but could once again not finish.

“I’m only here to help,” Theresa tried to reassure the girl just as Chris said, “Iris, are you okay.” Even from afar her rigid posture must have appeared unnatural.

“Y-yeah, just a little, uh, spooked,” she told her returning fiancé. Her cheeks flushed. She would not tell Chris about Theresa. This was understandable; he would consider her insane if she did. “I think I’m going to turn in, actually,” Iris continued, her voice shaking slightly.

“Oh, okay,” Chris answered, watching her retreating figure, slightly worried but, luckily for Theresa, not worried enough.

Theresa glided into the tent behind Iris. She allowed the other girl time enough to zip herself up in her red sleeping bag before speaking again. “He has cheated on you Iris. He will do it again. Don’t make the same mistake *I* have made.” Theresa took pride in identifying herself with this girl. Surely this would help Iris see reason. She had to know what was happening. “This is for your own good Iris.” Iris had pulled the sleeping bag up over her head. The red mass was now shaking as if it were a massage chair. Theresa, though set on her journey, acknowledged Iris’s discomfort. She finished with, “His lover is named Zoe,” before leaving the tent and its inhabitant, hoping Iris would mull over her wise counsel.

The next night Theresa paced behind Iris as she sat by the fire with Chris. “Her name is Zoe.” Iris jumped at Theresa’s voice. This was the first time Theresa had spoken tonight. By now Iris had ruled out the voice being a stranger in the woods. No one had been in the tent with her. Baring the possibility of her insanity, the voice had to be telling the truth. It was a spirit. “Give him back the ring. Leave him.”

“Are you okay?” the fiancé asked, laying a hand on Iris’s arm.

“Yes,” she responded meekly, as Theresa boomed behind her, “You won’t be! Give him back the ring. Leave him.”

Sometime later, the fiancé pulled out his phone and began typing. “Who are you texting?” Iris tried to sound casual, but her voice jerked giving away her anxiety.

“Zoe from work.”

Iris’s skin crawled at his answer. “Why?”

“She wants to know if I can take her shift on Monday,” he answered as Theresa whispered, “Liar,” in Iris’s ear, “He’s going to make love to her on Monday.”

“No, he’s not,” Iris whispered through clenched teeth.

“What Iris?” Chris asked still texting. *He didn't hear what I said*, Iris thought with a sigh of relief.

“Why would I lie to you?” Theresa demanded, perhaps a little too forcefully. “I have no purpose but to protect you. Trust me Iris. You can't trust him”

Theresa took up her guardian position behind Iris for the next three nights. Iris resisted Theresa's assertion less and less. She was nearing a breakthrough. Theresa could feel it.

“Ask him who he's texting,” Theresa demanded.

“Um, Chris,” Iris requested, hesitant but with a sense of assertion.

“Yeah babe?” Chris asked, raising his eyes to Iris's.

“Who are you texting?”

“Just Paul.”

“Liar!” Theresa shrieked.

“Liar,” Iris echoed in a thin wobble.

“What?” Chris turned his head, the question clear in his eyes as he looked at Iris.

It was as if a dam broke. “I know what you're up to,” Iris said, her voice rising in volume as tears began leaking out.

“I don't understand,” Chris responded, genuinely confused.

“I know your seeing another woman,” Iris said. “Zoe.” This last word was spit out with repulsion.

“What- I don't- why would you think that?” Chris asked, hurt etched in his features.

“I-” Iris paused and considered.

Before she could ponder the situation too long, Theresa hissed in her ear, “He's trying to divert you. He wants you off his trail. Don't let him trick you. Men are devious. He'll lie to you forever. Do you want that?”

“No,” Iris whispered, for the first time determinedly.

“No, what?” Chris asked, anxious for her reasoning.

“Do you want a liar? A cheater? Is that what you want for a husband?” Theresa goaded.

“You lied to me,” Iris said more strongly, a single tear rolling down her cheek.

“About what?” Chris asked, frustrated now. “I didn't lie to you.”

“You're cheating on me with Zoe!” Iris choked out.

“Why are you being paranoid? I'm not cheating on you!” Iris and her fiancé now stood a few feet apart, the conversation escalated to a shouting match.

“No, but you will!” Iris shrieked, crying. She ripped the diamond ring from her finger, threw it towards the fire, and ran off

into the woods. Her fiancé picked the ring up from the patch of grass it had landed on after bouncing off the stone firepit. Iris's tears cascaded down her cheeks like a waterfall, her wails so reminiscent of Theresa's.

Theresa lifted her face to welcome the sunrise, which would arrive in a few short hours. It would end her last day as a phantom on earth. She was blissfully ignorant to the fact that Chris hadn't cheated on Iris. Nor would he have in the future. But Theresa was convinced she had saved a soul from experiencing her same romantic fate. She believed she had completed her purpose. Theresa's memories would haunt her no more.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katelyn Robbins is from Lancaster, PA. She is a sophomore at Penn State studying English, history, and religious studies. She is the secretary for Kalliope Literary Magazine, and a member of Alliance Christian Fellowship on campus.



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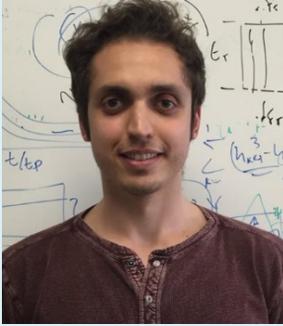
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